

SONGBIRD COMMOTION: THE NATURAL VOICE OF LOU V. CRABTREE

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by
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Abstract

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This study proposes that by reading the work of Appalachian author Lou V. Crabtree in light of contemporary feminist criticism on women's relationships to the concepts of identity, ecology, and religion, critics can find a point of access both for understanding an underappreciated Appalachian writer and for seeing how the concepts interconnect in contemporary literature. This study looks at samples from her short story collection, *Sweet Hollow*, and from her poetry collection, *The River Hills and Beyond*, focusing on texts where girls and women use their connections to the natural world to negotiate important life transformations, and to overcome many of the oppressions and repressions women face in contemporary Western society.

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Thanks for Mommy and Daddy, and all of my family, and everybody at home.

Dedication

To the future of Lou Crabtree — because it speaks.

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Chapter One

“Observing the diversity of life’s systems”: A Literature Review

Women in Appalachia face the same things, good and bad, that all people do, but their experiences are shaped in fundamental ways by their gender, their cultural contexts, and the complex ways that gender and culture interact. Particular ecologies, cultures, and histories have made Appalachian women a particular people, with important answers to questions of identity and social justice; and although their answers come out of a particular context, they are useful not only for women in Appalachia, but also for women in every culture and for people of all genders in all places.

This study will examine the writing of one Appalachian woman, Lou V. Crabtree, for what it has to say about the relationship of women in Appalachia to three concepts — identity, ecology, and religion (I will explain the reasons for choosing these concepts, and connections between them, later). Although Appalachian writers and literacy critics have long respected Lou Crabtree’s work, there has been to date no extended critical survey of her work. During her career, she earned a PEN/Faulkner Award nomination for her short story collection *Sweet Hollow*; she appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Appalachia Inside Out*, *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, and *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women*; she even appeared, at one point during the mid-1980s, on *The Today Show*. The introduction to her work in Joyce Dyer’s work explains her life this way:

Lou V.P. Crabtree was born in 1913 in the hills of Appalachia, where she has spent most of her life. She now lives in Abingdon, Virginia. Crabtree

graduated from Radford University and studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and the Faegin School of Drama. She taught for thirty-five years, served as regional auditioner for the American Academy (New York and Pasadena, California, branches), played in the Rock of Ages Band, and participated in school and community drama throughout much of her life. Currently, she lectures on astronomy and writes space poetry. Her stories, poems, and historical essays have appeared in publications such as the *Laurel Review*, *Shenandoah*, *American Way*, and *Sow's Ear*. *Sweet Hollow*, published in 1984 and now in its fifth printing, consists of seven stories about the lives of Appalachians fifty years ago, stories that are both stark and mystic. Her play *Calling on Lou* was performed in 1984 at the Barter Theatre, the state theatre of Virginia in Abingdon, and toured in 1985. Crabtree has completed several novels and short story collections that have never been offered for publication, including *The Village*, *Portions*, *Time in Place*, and *Nine Christmas Stories*. (*Bloodroot* 80)

But for all of this accomplishment, there have been no articles, except for review essays, book reviews, and interviews, which have analyzed her work in any depth, and certainly no monographs. She remains on the margins of our discourse about Appalachian literature.

Some of this obscurity, of course, has to do with her biography. Lou Crabtree worked quietly and published little, and most of that work came at the end of an active but primarily private life. She was born in a log cabin in 1913, in a world where subsistence farming was still the work of millions of Americans, and electric lights and refrigeration were still the luxuries of the upper class. From this beginning, she led a life that was simultaneously

typical and atypical for women of her time broadly and for Appalachian women of her time specifically. And yet the fact that she was able to accomplish so much, in so quietly, and to be so much, without contradiction, has long been a fascination to me. I grew up in the same valleys as she did, looking up at the same mountains. I have walked and driven by her street more times than I could know. I may even have seen her a number of times when I was young, never knowing it. She was ubiquitous in her community for almost all of her long life, a champion of all who slowly and quietly endure to speak their hard fought transformative vision.

Of her publicly available writings, there is one short story collection (*Sweet Hollow*), at least one nonfiction essay, and a slim retrospective of what is by all indications a much larger body of poetry (*The River Hills and Beyond*).¹ Taken together, this material does not make up a very large corpus, maybe 300 or so pages of printed material. Still, the quality of what is available to us is very high, and considering the obstacles she had to overcome to produce it, there is much to testify about in Crabtree's work.

This is a particularly good moment to begin a study of her work, because it focuses on so many subjects at the forefront of our critical discourse: the development of women's identities and public voices, our relationship as humans to the natural world, and the intersections between empirical and spiritual knowledge. Her work also offers the opportunity to examine each of these topics in a specifically Appalachian context. But perhaps more than anything else, Crabtree writes about women who survive, often in spite of serious odds, to form meaningful relationships with other people and with the earth, to define

¹ The essay is "Paradise in Price Hollow" available in *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*.

themselves against institutional forces that do not serve them well, and to create new senses of identity that work as seeds of reform and as seeds for healing and rebirth.

Situating Crabtree's writing within (and sometimes against) a tradition of feminist theoretical writings reveals that Crabtree seeks to heal wounds in Western culture directly related to hegemonies and manipulations of gender. Specifically, reading her work in light of the following critical texts offers new ways of understanding her work. Yet while Crabtree's discussions of identity, ecology, and religion intersect, it is easier to survey the history of critical discussion that underpins this study if we look at the three concepts separately, with a focus on key critical documents about those issues that were contemporary to Crabtree's time.

Identity

Two relevant critical texts concerned with learning, women's identities, and identity formation include *Women's Ways of Knowing*, a psychological study by Mary Belenky and other psychologists that seeks to update William Perry's study of men's educational development by assessing the transitions women encounter as they navigate the landscape of higher education, and *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment*, a monograph by Appalachian scholar Erica Abrams Locklear, which does some of the same work as the Belenky group, assessing women's relationships to higher education, but which also focuses in particular on Appalachia and examines the situation through a rhetorical rather than psychological lens.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, a cohort of four psychologists (Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule) attempt to chart common stages of educational development for women, whom they considered unrepresented or underrepresented by previous studies on the subject; their particular

inspiration, but also what they most read against, was the work of William Perry. What they found was that a woman's relationship to her "voice" was often a key factor in her development. As they write,

What we had not anticipated was that "voice" was more than an academic shorthand for a person's point of view. Well after we were into our interviews with women, we became aware that it is a metaphor that can apply to many aspects of women's experience and development. In describing their lives, women commonly talked about voice and silence. . . . We found that women repeatedly used the metaphor of voice to depict their intellectual and ethical development; and that the development of a sense of voice, mind, and self were intricately intertwined. (18)

They also found that there were definite stages in the development of voice, and though they don't imply that the various stages represent a single story of progression that's the same for every woman, they do suggest that it's a common path for women to transfer up the line of ways of knowing in the progression they've laid out, especially as they encounter key life and educational changes. Specifically, the group outlines five distinct stages of development: *silence*, where women exhibit "an extreme in denial of self and in dependence on external authority for direction"; *received knowledge*, where women, "[b]elieving that truth comes from others...still their own voices to hear the voices of others; *subjective knowledge*, where knowledge "resides in the person and can negate answers that the outside world supplies"; *procedural knowledge*, where women "pay attention to objects in the external world," processing them either through *separate* knowing, where they rely on "impersonal reason," or *connected* knowing, where they rely on "procedures for gaining access to other people's

knowledge”; and finally *constructed knowing*, where women “[integrate] knowledge that they [feel] intuitively was personally important with knowledge they had learned from others” (Belenky, et al. 24, 37, 54, 98, 104, 115, 135). In short, they see many women as moving from not speaking (although they point out that truly *silent* women are rare) to relying on the knowledge of others, and then to relying on systematic ways of knowing, all of this before they’re finally able to construct their own knowledge and knowledge models.

Studying Crabtree’s work makes it entirely possible to track a progression from silence to constructed knowledge, from a period of having her voice and narrative determined by others to a period of using her voice in original and powerful ways to shift accepted discourses. The connections between the Belenky group’s model and Crabtree’s development are not exact, primarily because the authority that most affected Crabtree’s early education was the natural world itself, a world traditionally (though often stereotypically) associated with women, and one that provided for her a model for knowledge that does not necessarily involve the same focus on “authorities . . . as sources of truth” as does the Belenky group’s model (39). Crabtree discovered rather early on a way to circumvent patriarchal repressions of knowledge even if it might have taken her longer, as I will explain later, to escape repressive institutions.

So overall, while there are residues of a repressed voice in her work, and revelations about the knowledge she gained by overcoming the pressures in her life, and characters who consciously struggle against the machinations of patriarchal authority (there are indeed many, many of those), when she dealt with those moments in her life, or more accurately when she came to deal with those moments on the page, both she and her characters had a strong body

of knowledge on which to draw, and on which to establish alternate models for personal development.

Examining similar issues, but from a different perspective than the Belenky group, Erica Abrams Locklear, in her study *Negotiating a Perilous Empowerment*, posits another reason for women's silences. Instead of primarily reading Appalachian women's silence as connected to their lack of development of voice in the face of patriarchal educational authority, Locklear connects Appalachian women's silences to a broader relationship between literacy and regional identity. As Locklear explains, the two concepts often don't share a positive connection:

For Appalachian women, the transformative powers of education, and more specifically, literacy, are no doubt empowering, but they can also be perilous. Gaining new technical, social, and cultural literacies, especially ones that might not be shared by those in the learner's home community, almost always come at a price. Usually this entails a palpable distancing from home, loved ones, and the mountain community that first nurtured the one who has chosen to leave. . . . (2)

Just as importantly, there is danger in literacies "that threaten established gender norms" because, for some, "the pursuit of new literacies" is seen as "imped[ing] the performance of duties deemed appropriate by societal gender standards" (Locklear 4, 20). Because Crabtree started publishing late in her life, and her published work says relatively little about the years of her working life, marriage, and motherhood, it's hard to say *very* much about how these patterns might have played out in her life. And in almost all of her writing, and in almost every one of her interviews, literacy seems to have actually functioned for Crabtree as a way

to establish a *deeper* connection with her homeplace. That said, it is worth noticing that it took Crabtree so long into her life to publish, and in what commentary she does give on her life as a wife and worker and mother (some of which we'll examine in particular later on), she describes that part of her life as a difficult and not always enjoyable process.

Throughout Locklear's study, she examines the work of Appalachian women writers (Harriette Arnow, Linda Scott DeRosier, Denise Giardina, and Lee Smith in particular) who grapple, and whose characters grapple, with the same issues that Crabtree likely faced, and that her characters certainly did. Locklear establishes a continuum of reaction to the challenges and potential losses of literacy attainment. Her examples range from Arnow's *The Dollmaker*, where, Arnow's "continued focus on literate events configures literacy as a normal, if not universal, part of mountain life," and her move of "forcing her characters to choose totally and completely between [the literacies] of Kentucky and Detroit . . . leaves no space for the emergence of understanding between these vastly different discursive worlds" to Lee Smith's work, where "literacy acquisition grants [her] characters in *Oral History* and *Fair and Tender Ladies* a voice fueled by literacy attainment" (Locklear 60, 91, 229). Locklear's point is that while literacy can be a difficult process, and there are "very real losses sometimes incurred through literacy acquisition," the risks can be worth the reward if Appalachian women learn how to negotiate between literacies (229), or, as the Belenky group might put it, to establish constructed knowledge.

What is most important about Locklear's work, however (at least for this study), is that it actually mentions Lou Crabtree. While writing about Lee Smith's process in composing *Fair and Tender Ladies*, Locklear explains the connection that existed between Smith and Crabtree:

As with much of her fiction, Smith found inspiration for *Fair and Tender Ladies* from real life. . . . Smith highlights Ivy's lack of formal education in the beginning of *Fair and Tender Ladies* through heavy dialect and unconventional spelling, and readers become increasingly aware of the literary progressions Ivy makes as she continues to read and write. Ivy's refusal to consider herself an author also resonates with readers.

Smith worked to overturn this same notion in the life of Lou Crabtree, Smith's model for Ivy Rowe. Smith encountered Crabtree when teaching a writing workshop in Abingdon, Virginia, and she discovered that Crabtree had been writing stories her entire life without any thought of publication. . . .

Smith was amazed at Crabtree's talent, and after working with her, reviewing her pieces, and helping her polish selected stories, in 1984 LSU Press published Crabtree's collection of short stories titled *Sweet Hollow*. (210-11)

In other words, Crabtree came to publishing out of a long silence, but that silence was not an indication of her illiteracy. Moreover, her literacy was not an indication of her loss, because for Crabtree the act of writing itself was so integral to her identity as an Appalachian woman that it was the act itself, rather than receiving recognition for her writing, that kept her going.

This isn't to romanticize or explain away Crabtree's silence, which was most likely the result of pressures outlined by Locklear and Belenky. In fact, during their discussion of young subjective knowers, the Belenky group outlines a writing process very similar to Crabtree's before she met Smith:

As responsible and serious as these young [subjective knowers] appear from the outside, they often harbor unspoken desires to be free from prescriptions

of others. They dream of escape and release. They can be intensely subjective, spilling out the truth about themselves, about their views on life and living, in their diaries and daydreams. Rarely do they voice these private thoughts in public, although they may share them with friends. (66)

Lou Crabtree was close to seventy years old when she first met Lee Smith and had only published one short story (outside of college).² As she hinted in several author biographical notes and interviews, she felt fully comfortable in her life as a writer only after her husband died and her children were grown. Moreover, while the biographical information on Crabtree is somewhat limited, many of the characters in her stories and poems (and most of these characters are women) experience intense struggles as they seek to develop themselves against repressive institutions and traditions, many while not all headed by men. And while seldom, if ever, in Crabtree's work does reading or literacy mark a woman as separated from her community, there are often conflicts between peoples' off-the-page literacies, with women finding themselves in marginalized or stigmatized positions because of their ways of knowing and experiencing the world.

Ecology

Texts that most concern themselves with Appalachian women's relationships to ecology and the natural world include *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*, scholar Elizabeth S.D. Engelhardt's application of contemporary ecology feminist theory to 19th and 20th century Appalachian literature; *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, Parks Lanier's edited collection of essays which, while not primarily focused on ecology or gender issues, applies Gaston Bachelard's study of *The Poetics of Space* to Appalachian literature, assessing how constructed and geographical

² "Bus Terminal," in *Shenandoah*.

spaces figure in Appalachian literature, a conversation which can provide valuable contexts for any ecocritical study of Appalachian literature; and “Appalachian Animals on our Mind,” a thesis by April Leigh Walters on the application of critical animal studies (CAS) theory to Appalachian literature.

“Ecofeminist” and “ecological feminist” name a discourse that is a relatively new but key strand of conversation in the study of Appalachian literature. In the 2005 anthology *An American Vein: Critical Readings in Appalachian Literature*, Elizabeth Englehardt’s ecofeminist approach appears in the last essay, where the author calls for new readings of Appalachian literature which reflect the values of the movement; in other words, that critical work is only just beginning to be done. Englehardt’s specific purpose is to perform a creative re-envisioning of the works of Wilma Dykeman and Effie Waller Smith. As Engelhardt writes of her approach,

Feminist ecocriticism’s theoretical tools can be applied to any text and indeed should be. At its heart, though, Appalachian literature is defined by the mountains, rivers, and trees rising up through it and by the diversity of people who have fallen in love with these mountains. I want to see us build a theory of literary criticism that acknowledges and values those people and places.

(351)

As one of the most politically progressive modes of literary criticism currently being performed, engaging, activist, and radically interdisciplinary, the ecocritical model represents the advance guard in Appalachian studies.

Engelhardt expanded her ecological feminist reading in her monograph *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*. Therein, she provides a

broader overview of the movement and its relevance to the study of Appalachian women's writing. As she defines it, ecological feminism is a movement characterized by at least four points: the idea that "humans and nonhumans together are part of the total ecology," that "the nonhuman world has agency—at its most basic, the ability to consider and to act," that "activism and actions in communities must consider long-term sustainability for the community," and that they "are not essentialist: women are not necessarily united in sisterhood, nor are they equally oppressed, nor are they the only gender to have a role in enacting justice" (3-4). It is a particularly good model for examining Appalachian women's writings, she explains, in part because examining them in this way counteracts stereotypes of feminism and environmentalism as "primarily white, northeastern movement[s]" and instead paints them as they actually were (and are) concepts that have "existed in a complicated relationship to each other at least since the turn of the last century" (13, 32). As Engelhardt concludes,

Literary, historical, and social conversations about human and nonhuman communities lie underneath the surface of texts written by Appalachia's different kinds of women—political, Progressive, college, modern, or environmental club women. Reading them closely unearths the tangled roots of feminism, environmentalism, and literature and exposes the forgotten legacy of ecological feminism in Appalachia (32).

Although Englehardt's text focuses on authors from the turn of the last century, seeing Crabtree as part of the tradition that those authors represent, and reading her through a specifically ecological lens, makes a great deal of sense. As Engelhardt emphasizes, while a woman is not necessarily an environmentalist, and there is no *essential* connection between

women and nature (at least no *more* than there's an essential, homogenous relationship between any demographic and nature) to be an *Appalachian* woman writer is to exist in relationship to a particular gender and a particular place, a place with a definite tradition of considering the connection between people and their place. And even the most cursory reading of Crabtree's work, as examples will show, demonstrate that her connection to and meditation on the nonhuman world is perhaps her deepest source for literary material.

A more specific discourse within ecofeminist discourse is the Critical Animal Studies (CAS) movement. Critics in this field claim that the othering of humans, especially racial, sexual, and gender otherings, hold a direct relationship to the othering of non-human animals. CAS critics attempt to chart and counteract this othering, both on the page in their criticism and often through real-world direct activism. One writer who is likely to become a key critic in this field, and who focuses on applications of CAS theory in Appalachian contexts, is April Leigh Walters. An important example of this new work is her thesis study "Appalachian Animals on our Mind: A Survey of Human-Animal Relationships in Appalachian Literature." Walters's study is likely the first to apply CAS theory to Appalachian literature. As she writes, until her study, "the only area of Appalachian scholarship where nonhuman animals [have been] routinely discussed is in environmental histories, and these studies are mainly about Appalachian wildlife" (Walters 1). Her scholarship, however, moves beyond this approach, focusing on transactive relationships between humans and nonhumans that involve more than the detached observation which accompanies the appreciation of wildlife. As she explains,

The histories which already exist do not uncover the more intimate side of keeping animals. Histories of Appalachia do not provide any information on

the emotional comfort given, or in other cases, heartache, nonhuman animals caused their keepers and companions. History does not address, for example, how a mother felt when her family's cow, which provided so much, had to be sold, or how the children felt when they were forced to give up their nonhuman animals and move into a coal camp. Finally, histories of Appalachia do not make available any discussion of how the nonhuman animals were treated by the family or how the animals treated the family. (Walters 43-44)

Walters's scholarship is typical of CAS work in that it has an activist intent, and it is designed to inspire tangible change. She focuses on literature because it provides, she writes, "a potential model for culture" where "artful recommendations" can help drive cultural evolution—hopefully, she proposes, towards a more animal-conscious society (Walters 44).

Walters's initial study has some self-admitted gaps, however, a few of which this study (even though it is not written from a CAS perspective) can begin to fill. She explains that "the majority of the animals discussed [in her work] are pets, such as dogs; working animals, such as cows and horses; and very few wild animals" (Walters 7). As the stories in *Sweet Hollow* explore the lives of both domesticated and wild animals (especially snakes), Crabtree helps to broaden the perspective on human-animal relationships we gain from Walters's examinations of mostly domestic relationships. Moreover, much of Walters's work is set up to counter dominant trends, to reclaim non-human animals from invisibility, and to speak against a tradition of patriarchal oppression. She finds more models to augment than models that might prove to be positive examples of human-animal interaction. Crabtree's work, however, does provide those more positive examples.

One of the major shifts that has come with increased awareness of CAS is a movement towards a different model for the study of animals generally. This approach has been a way of revisiting and re-envisioning scientific discourse that frees it, from the perspective of CAS theorists, from the strictures of a patriarchal, anthropocentric interpretation of the scientific model, a methodology that many CAS theorists and ecofeminists claim serves only to reify the hierarchies of human over animal and male or female. For example, as Catherine Russell explains in her writing on “Zoology, Pornography, [and] Ethnobiography,” a chapter in her study of *Experimental Ethnography* which explores objectifying portrayals of animals and colonized humans,

To see, after all, is not to know or possess the Other, but both pornography and ethnography embody a utopian desire to transcend and eliminate this contradiction. Both imply a mastery of vision that passes for possession and knowledge, apparently triumphing over the representation of sexuality and racial differences by bringing them into the regime of the visible. If we add zoology as a third term to this pairing of ethnography and pornography, the desire for pleasure and knowledge is mapped onto a desire for control and mastery. The cage and the hunt render the limits of the game very literal; the killing of wild animals further introduces an element of death into the apparatus of vision that links these different cultural practices. (Russell 124)

The comparisons and equations here might seem somewhat stark (some might even say stretched), and the inclusion of “porn” in this discussion might seem a bit out of place at first; but the important point, and the one relevant to a study of Crabtree, is that the critical conversation on science is shifting from a focus on learning by looking *at things* to a focus

on learning by living *with beings*. In the CAS/ecofeminist view, if the ability to gaze at a subject with a sense of ownership connects with the ability to treat that subject as an object (and even to kill her/him), and the gaze of ownership holds hegemonic status in the scientific community, then new methods must be developed for engagement with the natural world.

As Sherry Ortner outlined in her early study of gender in relation to the nature/culture binary, as late as 1972 it could be said that “[t]he search for a genuinely egalitarian, let alone matriarchal, culture, has proven fruitless” (8). In every human society, Ortner claimed, men hold at least some social advantage over women, and this position is often justified by using the same logic that upholds the assumptions of anthropocentric science. Whether or not Ortner’s interpretation holds up completely, scholars interested in elevating the position of both human females and non-human animals need to promote and reclaim texts that support more egalitarian taxonomies of being, especially when those texts have been authored by talented but obscured writers like Crabtree. Much of her poetry and almost all of her published fiction features non-human animals as prominent characters, and she often depicts human-animal relationships in ways that run counter to the typical limitations ascribed to those relationships. Hers is an egalitarian taxonomy, a way of seeing the world that is informed, as she herself writes, by her earliest years in what she calls the “Paradise in Price Hollow”:

Paradise in Price Hollow was partly Adam’s paradise *before* the apple got caught in his throat.

Was I a spirit set down in that paradise for sixteen years, to find out what it is to be human? Or was I a human there to absorb the spirit that would last eighty years and plant something in the heart of me? That something

would save me—help me to stand apart, isolated, all the while observing the diversity of life’s systems, circles, patterns. That something would give me roots to write from. (Crabtree “Paradise” 81)

The vocabulary of observation might seem borrowed from the dominant paradigm, but the spirit of the quotation is decidedly ecofeminist (and decidedly in contrast to the Belenky group’s observations of women’s early relationship to power). No question, the words “apart, isolated” complicate a portrait of Crabtree as a subjective participant in nature, as at first they would seem to put her in the camp of objective observation. Considering that the quotation refers to her life as a writer, and considering how far afield her life took her from those early experiences, we may find that what she says probably has more to do with her position relative to modern human society than to the society of plants and non-human animals.

Moreover, other statements by Crabtree augment this picture, indicating that this early education was centered on a true recognition of non-human animals as independently significant, teaching beings. As Sandra Ballard and Patricia Hudson quote Crabtree in their anthology *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*,

“During the first sixteen years of my life,” [Crabtree] said, “my company was mostly the animals and the flowers and the trees,” and she delighted in their company. “We named everything. I tried to get that feeling into my stories. I have the little girl in ‘Homer-Snake’ do that, because that was what we did.” (141)

Add this to the last quotation, and it’s obvious that the “spirit” Crabtree spoke of was a non-human one, contained in the Divine and the Divine’s divine animal creations (“Paradise”

81). Also, it indicates her augmentation of Eden: in Crabtree's paradise, both boys and girls participate in Adam's naming work.

As Engelhardt and Walters suggest, we are only beginning to outline a critical literature that can address Appalachian literature in relation to all its peoples, human and non-human. Wherever we are along this path, however, the work of Lou Crabtree provides important models for envisioning affirmative human-animal relationships in Appalachia. Understanding such models is important, as Walters explains, if we are to move the conversation on ecology in Appalachia forward:

As a whole, Appalachian literature provides more intimate details of the relationships found between Appalachian residents and their nonhuman animal counterparts than does the history. In some cases, Appalachian literature reveals just how important the nonhuman animal members of the family were to the survival of the family. The Appalachian fiction also draws out the complex system of reliance and co-dependence between humans and nonhuman animals. Furthermore, the literature is able to show more of the human attitudes and feelings toward the nonhuman animals during these periods of great change than the history is able to show. (Walters 71-72)

In other words, in order to develop empathy with animals, human or nonhuman, and to understand their experiences as well as possible, and to understand that all animals can teach us lessons while being something more to us than mere symbols, we must learn to imagine stories of mutual involvement between animals, the very kind of stories Lou Crabtree provides us.

Religion

Lastly, critical texts relevant to Crabtree's work and primarily concerned with religion include *Womanspirit Rising*, an edited collection of essays by late 20th century feminist theologians that seeks to reform women's religious and spiritual understandings in the light of long traditions of Western patriarchal religion. A second book, perhaps the closest in spirit to Crabtree of all the critical texts (because it is the one that most consciously deals with all three concepts at the same time) is *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*, a text by contemporary Cherokee/Appalachian writer Marilou Awiakta, which examines issues of gender, religion, politics, and ecology from a holistically Cherokee/Appalachian perspective.

A lot has changed since Jim Wayne Miller first wrote his study of "Appalachian Literature at Home in This World." Therein, he explains that Appalachian religion is a decidedly worldly phenomenon, an outlook that spills over into its literature; he also suggests that this world and the next are "strictly separated":

[I]f heaven in traditional Appalachian culture is often no more than the familiar, known world, the important thing is that this world and the next are nevertheless strictly separated. The varieties of Protestantism that have flourished in the region quite logically assume, given the premise of a transcendent God, a clear demarcation between this world and the next. There's a better world a-waiting, but it's off yonder in the sky. In the meantime, we are here, in this life, and we should not expect much help from God. Religion and life in this world do not have much to do with one another.

Religion certainly has nothing to do with “worldly” things, but rather with “spiritual” things. (Miller 14)

Miller goes on to explain how this view fits into Appalachian literature, especially the literature of James Still. In Miller’s estimation,

In the poems, short stories, and novels of James Still one finds the most artful expression of the worldly, secular tradition of Appalachian literature, as well as the clearest and most emphatic distinction between worldly and otherworldly views. Still’s early hill folk typically assume the existence of a beyond . . . [b]ut while [his novel *River of Earth*] accommodates this otherworldly view, other characters offer little affirmation of it. The notion of a beyond is irrelevant to their immediate concerns—and to the novel’s thematic and imagistic structure. (Miller 15)

I quote from Miller’s essay at length but it has become possibly the central text for the discussion of religion in Appalachian literature. Even when one disagrees with Miller’s assertions, as for example John Lang did in his study *Six Poets from the Mountain South*, they still have to reason against his distinctions.³

Crabtree’s differences from traditional Appalachian Christianity are perhaps more subtle than her differences from typical presentations of nature and animals in Appalachian literature, but the critiques she does make are striking and important.

Although some of the theoretical texts addressed in this study might seem somewhat dated (a good number were written between the late 1970s and early 1990s), they represent

³ To read further, see Miller’s “Appalachian Fiction at Home in This World,” in *An American Vein: Critical Readings on Appalachian Literature*, and John Lang’s *Six Poets*. Generally, where Miller reads Appalachian literature as focusing mostly on secular situations and issues, Lang sees that many Appalachian writers, especially those who came after Miller, write about spiritual issues repeatedly (and, particularly, connect those experiences to experiences in the natural world).

patterns of thought current with Crabtree's contemporaries. These key texts from the period (or at least key texts within their discourse communities) show strands of progressive thought in their fields which Crabtree's visions either confirm or challenge.

The text which best represents progressive feminist theology in Crabtree's time is Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow's edited volume, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (for this study, I have used the 1992 edition). As the editors state, the volume is intended as a compendium of theoretical writings by leading Western feminist theologians of the late 20th century; all of them, the editors claim, are women who "agree that religion is deeply meaningful in human life and that the traditional religions of the West have betrayed women . . . [who] are convinced that religion must be reformed or reconstructed to suppose the full human dignity of women" (Goldenberg 1).

In this reading of Crabtree, we can see her as a Christian reformist and heterodox⁴ who presents interpretations and reimaginings of Biblical and theological constructs that are decidedly feminist and anti-patriarchal, but whose methodology reform is decidedly different from most of the women represented in Christ and Plaskow's volume. That is, Crabtree is a religious feminist, but not one focused on the Judeo-Christian tradition's betrayal of women. This is because while most of the thinkers represented in *Womanspirit Rising* read the Christian tradition through a Euroamerican lens, or understand it as a largely Euro-American construct, Crabtree's Christianity has a specifically Appalachian context, and her overall religious understanding is syncretic, connected to Cherokee-Appalachian traditions and contemporary cosmological understandings as well as the Biblical tradition. This affords her a theology and Christology (that is, a theory for understanding Jesus's place in the world)

⁴ "Heterodox" refers to one who maintains affiliation with a religion while holding views outside the mainstream of that religion.

separated from the European philosophical tradition, a connection that many critics tend to take for granted.

Of the essays in *Womanspirit Rising*, Sheila Collins's "Theology in the Politics of Appalachian Women" obviously has the most direct connection to Crabtree. The heart of Collins' argument, and a motive of writing and faith that Crabtree demonstrates so brilliantly, is that for women in Appalachia to make a claim towards authentic and healthy religious participation, they have to make the narration of theology mesh with their own lives and traditions:

If theology is to be meaningful for us, it must not start with abstractions, but with *our stories*—just as the early Hebrews and Christians of the Bible began with theirs. Somehow, our churches got the order reversed. How many of us were taught as children to memorize Bible stories and verses before we ever understood or had a chance to articulate our own story? We cannot appreciate the meaning of another's experience—especially if that experience occurred two and three thousand years ago—until we have asked the right questions of our own. (Collins 151)

The reconsideration of Biblical archetypes is perhaps the key narrative trope in *Sweet Hollow*. At least three of the stories ("Little Jesus," "Holy Spirit," and "The Miracle at Sweet Hollow") directly reference religion in their titles, and almost all of them consider the supernatural. As I will explain in the next chapter, "Homer-Snake" can be read as an Eden story, and "Price's Bewitched Cow" considers the possibilities of witchcraft. Other stories from *Sweet Hollow* reference the religious as well, in the depiction of the Nativity scene in "Little Jesus," the depiction of the afterlife in "Holy Spirit," and the meditation on the sins

and (possibly unfulfilled) redemption of a mountain preacher in “Wildcat John.” And among Crabtree’s poems there are several depicted prayers (“Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep,” “All the Little Birdies and Beasties,” and “Refugees”), the depicted testimony of “Salvation,” and the direct or indirect Biblical reimaginings of “Noah’s Animals” and “Shulammite Girl.” All of these works are characterized by the same elements: they display a loyalty to and faith in their source material; they consider or reconsider religious themes in an Appalachian context; and they are often theologically heterodox.

Yet while Crabtree indeed proves a heterodox, and though her writings have a lot to say in terms of a critique of *how* religious acts are carried out, none of her writings or statements would seem to show any sign of sacrilegious intent. Rather, every indication shows that Crabtree possessed a broad and encompassing faith in the Divine, a Divine that is (in contrast to some of the constructions laid out in *Womanspirit Rising*, while that volume does contain the work of some thinkers who hold a similar position) *both* Christian and non-anthropomorphic. As Lee Smith wrote of Crabtree’s “space” poems,

Lou’s new interest [in space] seems to be an expansion—not a contradiction—of traditional religion. “‘I went to churches all my life,’ she tells me, mentioning the Old Centenary Methodist Church in particular. ‘I never went to church in my life that I wasn’t helped.’ And now, she says, ‘I’m open! I’m open to everything!’” (*The River Hills* xiii).

The subtlety of this position is important, as it represents a way of abandoning the phallocentrism (that is, focus on the physically male) involved in traditional interpretations of Christianity without abandoning the religion itself. It also represents a way of shifting the conversation on religion to one that focuses on saying yes to concepts rather than no.

Connecting this religious attitude back to the conversations on identity and ecology, we find that in Crabtree's estimation, the three concepts implicitly overlap. As she gained in scientific knowledge, as Judy K. Miller explains, Crabtree had a major theological shift (similar to that of women of the theologians in *Womanspirit Rising*) that connects directly to her conception of gender:

[Lou's] exploration of space has helped [her] expand her understanding of spirituality. "I have a new way of thinking about God," she says. "A man scientist told me that he thought of God as mixed up with all of the laws of science and astronomy and physics. In my spiritual life, I have put away all of the artists' pictures that show God as a man. I thought of God as a man all of my life, and even as a woman from old religious statues like Juno and Venus. (89)

Because of this shift, and because in Crabtree we must eventually come to see the conversations on identity, ecology, and religion as interlinked, perhaps the critical text which best outlines the worldview outlined in Crabtree's works is Marilou Awiakta's *Selu: Seeking the Corn Mother's Wisdom*. In *Selu*, Awiakta considers traditional Cherokee teachings on Selu and applies them to modern questions about the same concepts we have dealt with throughout this introduction: identity, ecology, and religion. The difference with Awiakta is that these concepts are never considered in isolation; in the tradition out of which she speaks, Awiakta sees all concepts and truths as interrelated.

Yet a few distinct strains of thought can be taken from *Selu*, ones that bear a serious import for understanding Crabtree's work, and how it too combines meditations on identity,

ecology, and religion. First among these is the idea that science as conceived of in the West is not the end of knowledge. As Awiakta explains,

American society (and Western society as a whole) is so oriented towards science, technology and legality that a discrepancy in a fact calls the validity of what is being said into question. If the facts are wrong, how can the statement be true? But the arts are not about facts. They are about creating images and mental connections. (*Selu* 15)

She also conceives of gender in far different ways than the dominant culture, as witnessed by the following explications of the traditional Cherokee teachings on the origins of corn (I have chosen not to reprint excerpts from that story here out of respect to Awiakta's admonition that the story can only be fully understood when told fully, and in its "cultural context"):

In all versions of the compass story, respect between genders is an implicit wisdom. Casting the relationship in familial terms — grandmother and grandsons or mother and sons — keeps the focus off "the battle of the sexes" and *on* the basic issue: Humanity has two genders. Sexual preference is a separate issue. To preserve the balance, the genders must cooperate and get along, for themselves, for the sake of the community and the environment. Perhaps one reason versions of this story are still often told is that they so well express the Cherokee philosophy of harmony, which begins in the tangible world with Mother Earth. (*Selu* 23)

.....

In the Western mind, the general story—or paradigm—of the passivity of Earth and of Woman has also created a fissure centuries deep. Earth and

Woman, so it is told, bear all things, believe all things and return eternally to nurture and sustain even those who abuse them. At first listening, the harsh version of Selu's story passes so quickly that one might hear it say that after the sons kill her, Selu simply forgives them and returns faithfully to feed them.

She doesn't.

Without being mean-spirited about it—even when the transgressors are bent on murdering her—the Corn-Mother calmly draws a line in her heart's sweet meal, reminding her sons that to cross it is to separate themselves from their sustainer. (Awiakta *Selu* 251-52)

Awiakta's words highlight the fact that Crabtree is speaking from an Appalachian tradition that is not just Western in its origins. Crabtree is relying on a tradition that has roots in both Native and European sentiments, a tradition that has ample room for the balance brought to bear by the contributions of all writers conscious of their relationships to themselves as women (or men, or transgendered), to the world around them, and to the Divine. Moreover, writers like Awiakta and Crabtree are part of a tradition of women's writing that doesn't *react* to the dominant state of the world with alternative visions, but rather tries to get us all to remember that the egalitarian, that the balanced, that that *is* actually the first position, the first vision. This tradition is particularly evident in the work of many Native women writers, such as Awiakta, and has often been cited as a "Native" feminism. In many ways that is a deserved title, and serves to point out the unique contributions of Native American feminists and their reactions to some of the limitations of Western feminist paradigms. But as Awiakta indicates, the ability to see from the corners of

the eyes, as she would put it, is a human rather than just a Native American ability; and that is exactly the kind of vision Crabtree possesses.

In short, my general argument is this: whereas many of Crabtree's contemporaries looked (and still look) at gender and other social issues through lenses that privilege conflict and a direct response to oppression, and which focus on the rejection of patriarchal institutional scripts as a key part of women's well-being, Crabtree instead focused on syncretic solutions to women's problems, combining her beliefs about her identity as a woman and her faith in nature with her religious faith. She sought to find common ground between worldviews and new ways to view traditional concepts without discounting the traditions themselves. To do this, she had to write about identity, the Earth, and faith as intimately interconnected concepts; and the places where she tells her more important and memorable stories are the places where those concepts most directly overlap.

Chapter Two

Sweet Hollow: Heterodox Parables

Crabtree's development towards public writing was difficult, and although her writing moves ahead of many of the problems outlined by the theorists above, her movement *through* those problems inspired her vision. In fact, for someone whom Lee Smith would later call so enthusiastically "a commotion," the dominant mode of Crabtree's early life indeed seemed to be that of silence, as defined by the Belenky group. Crabtree didn't publish her first piece (with the exception of a few pieces in her college newspaper and literary magazine), the story "Bus Terminal," until she was nearly sixty years old; and it took another ten years for her to publish *Sweet Hollow*, her only full collection of stories. In all, Crabtree published only eight short stories in her life, although every indication seems to point to the fact that she wrote many more.

For the purposes of this study, we will examine only three of Crabtree's stories, all from *Sweet Hollow*: "Homer-Snake," "Price's Bewitched Cow," and "The Jake Pond." All of Crabtree's stories are worthy of comment, but in these three stories the natural world is especially prominent and children clearly develop identities through their relationships to nature. These elements are certainly at play in Crabtree's other stories as well, but the fact is that those stories are most focused on studies of human communities and institutions, whereas in these three stories, we find a more useful intersection between the lives of women, animals, and questions of the spirit—questions that fit somewhat more closely with the concepts that guide this study.

“Homer-Snake” as Eden Story

In “Homer-Snake,” Crabtree presents a politics of nature and gender relationships that inverts those set out by Ortner, questioning the traditional privilege given to the masculine, cultural, and (organizationally) religious in determining social norms and replacing that power with the feminine, natural, and magical. More specifically, “Homer-Snake” provides the reader with at least four experiences of human-animal relationships, listed here from most beneficent to most malevolent. First, there is the symbiotic relationship, seen in Old Marth’s “protection” of Homer and the narrator’s close focus on Homer in order to learn from him about the natural world (3). Second, there is the domestic relationship, seen in Old Marth’s feeding of non-vegan agricultural products to Homer (which ultimately weakens him in his confrontations with the Murray boys). Third, there is Bud’s objectifying gaze at nature. And, fourth, the predatory relationship is seen in the Murray boys’ abject violence. In Crabtree’s Eden, snakes and women and natural knowledge form the faction of benevolence; what falls does so through men and their violence.

First and best of these models is the symbiotic relationship that exists between Old Marth and Homer. This connection spans most of their companionship (if not, necessarily, most of the story, as it begins *in media res*), and it appears in the narrator’s experiences with Homer. In these relationships, Homer is treated as a teacher who possesses power and individuality as a snake. For Marth, Homer is an old friend, and one who seems to live more next to her than with her, even though his place is in the architecture of her house:

I had seen Homer-snake many times. Bud had, too. Homer had lived for years back of Old Marth’s house in the corner of the outside rock chimney. A hole was visible, where for warmth Homer crawled in the winter.

I once asked Old Marth, “Did Homer-snake dig his hole by himself?”

Old Marth replied, “I expect it is a once frog hole.” (2)

In this acknowledgement, we learn at least two things about Old Marth: first, that she possesses at least some knowledge of the multiple ways of non-human animal living, particularly how both frogs and snakes house and protect themselves. Moreover, we learn that she takes little regard for the possession of her house as a unified entity detached from the natural world. The hole is not one in her house that she allows Homer to stay in, but rather one which used to belong to a frog and which Homer has now found and inherited (or, most likely, taken by force).

This house-animal dynamic is particularly important, and Marth’s ability to imagine the house as a mutable space open to various influences is one of the sharpest indications that Crabtree has constructed a story which works against a strictly human worldview. And this openness, strangely enough, is an aspect of Crabtree’s work that probably has the most precedent in the critical literature on Appalachian literature. In *The Poetics of Appalachian Space*, scholar Don Johnson examined “The Appalachian Homeplace as Oneiric House,” treating Appalachians’ connections to the houses of their youth from a decidedly humanist perspective:

For the people of the eastern mountains, a region continuously inhabited by descendants of the original white settlers for over two centuries, the mountain cabin is the *homeplace*, and because of the circumstances described above, the effect of its abandonment is especially profound, having both personal and societal implications. Unlike the European, whose oneiric house might have been moved away from, might even have been demolished,

the Appalachian can take no comfort in cultural evolution. The European's house might have been built on the ruins of four or five earlier cultures, a fact which argues not for impermanence but for continuity. Thus, when the European recreates the oneiric house in his reverie, his nostalgia—though poignant—is tempered by knowledge that the distance between past and present is almost wholly chronological.

When the Appalachian remembers the oneiric house, on the other hand, such reverie often carries with it a sense of deep loss and dislocation. It frequently engenders grief for the loss of “primal sympathy,” but it also provokes a gnawing awareness of the renunciation of a way of life. (41)

Of course, Crabtree's work follows this model in many ways. As already suggested, “Homer-Snake” is a decidedly Edenic story, an imaginative appropriation of Judeo-Christian origin imagery. Most of the same important motifs remain: a garden/wilderness of innocence, gender differences that lead to sin, a snake that gives knowledge, and the introduction of death into the world. As such, it has to deal with concepts of innocence, the loss of innocence, and the inherent connections between innocence and a rural place.

In her non-fiction writing on Price Hollow, the real location that served as inspiration for the Sweet Hollow of her stories, Crabtree does speak in some detail about the oneiric nature of her childhood home (even if she doesn't use those terms), and as will be relevant for the eco-conscious reader, she connects the loss of that place, including the “kill[ing] of animals,” to a history of degrading institutions:

I cannot really ever return to the place I knew as a child. Those sixteen years ended and gave way to twenty years of meager living, years not unlike

those after the Civil War when the slaves left and cornfields lay vacant and liquor stills were idle from no corn to feed them. Price Hollow, where one was never hungry or naked, never lonely or alone, had disappeared.

One can never go back. Loggers came, trees fell, and the soils of hill land wore down. The coal seams were ravaged, hunters killed the animals, and in the flat places, tobacco and marijuana were planted. A garbage disposal at the head of the creek polluted the water and destroyed fish downriver.

(“Paradise” 85)

The echoes between Crabtree’s sentiments and Johnson’s descriptions are uncanny. A real sense of loss is presented in her story, a sense of a disjunctive relationship to history. Yet what makes “Homer-Snake” such a redemptive story is that by fashioning Homer’s home as a “once frog hole” (2), and placing that home within the space of Marth’s cabin, Crabtree effectively reclaims the “four or five earlier cultures” which Johnson speaks of as undergrounding the European oneiric house (41). And, in a move that is even more affirmative than Johnson’s model, Crabtree circumvents the need for linear, “chronological” remembrance by making those other cultures not previous but contiguous (41). By making the other cultures non-human cultures, and by making their participation in the oneiric space one that involves, by necessity, cycle and decay (how else would a frog or snake gain entrée in the house’s architecture than to partially dismantle it?), Crabtree paints a portrait of a culture where loss is rendered natural and a real communication between past and present can easily be achieved by communion with nature.

Or, as Marilou Awiakta would say, Lou Crabtree is attuned to the web of life.

Awiakta, the author of *Selu*, also contributed an essay, “Daydreaming Primal Space,” to *The*

Poetics of Appalachian Space. In it, she provides a Cherokee/Appalachian perspective on Bachelard's theories. Though Awiakta recognized his explorations as gifted in their own way, she ultimately concluded that his work was limited as a model for understanding Appalachian imaginative history. As she wrote,

We're on our way to primal space in Appalachia, to the "spinners" and their web. But we can't get there through Bachelard's paradigm of the *house* as "the original shell." Although he looks at it "from the corners of his eyes," the cast of his gaze — the perception governed by culture — is of the West. It is irreconcilable with the traditional world view of American Indians and therefore with the mode of the web. (Awiakta "Daydreaming" 196)

In place of his view, she contends, there needs to be a proper understanding for the interconnected "web" of existence, one that doesn't place the beginning in any human construction (such as a house), but rather sees the connections between human culture and the natural world as part of an inseparable matrix — a concept defined by Donna Haraway as the idea of the *natureculture* (*When Species Meet*). In Awiakta's explanation, Appalachia is a meeting ground for conflicting understandings of nature and space, and conscious thinkers must continue, as they always have, to struggle for an integrated understanding:

When Europeans arrived, they found many such webs among the mountains. The Cherokee had spun the largest, stretching almost the length and breadth of Appalachia. Some of the newcomers liked living in the round. Either they brought this holistic ability with them, or they learned it from the Indians or from Mother Earth herself. They looked at everything three times, with a twinkle. For a while everyone lived in harmony.

Other Europeans settlers believed in the perception of the right and left eyes *only*. Philosophically, their point of view contained the seed of a dichotomy that would bear deadly fruit: God is God; nature is “the other.” They feared the wilderness, the “savages” who lived there, and the amorphous power of the intuitive both represented. (“Daydreaming” 193-94)

This tension, between an understanding of Appalachia as a natureculture and the patriarchal view of culture as separate from nature is the essential Eden story of “Homer-Snake,” and it is in providing a defense against the patriarchal model that Crabtree makes her essential “artful recommendation” (Walters 44). The symbiotic education that humans gain by listening to animals (in the way the narrator listens to Homer) leads to spiritual edification and provides a model for affirmatively counteracting patriarchy and anthropocentrism. The moral is, therefore, choose life.

Now it might seem, at first, that Old Marth’s treatment of Homer is *only* symbiotic, and that what material comforts she does provide him she gives as mutual recompense for his protection, not as an attempt to turn him into a pet. Homer-snake does, certainly, take charge in maintaining his own accommodations, and what food Marth does provide him exists as treats and supplements to his natural diet, which he hunts for and provides for himself. Still, it is important to note just what it is Marth gives Homer (cream and jelly, both agricultural products) and what effect these supplements have on his activity. That is, they make him “fat,” and as an indirect result, susceptible to the Murray boys’ final, fatal attack (2). In recognizing Homer’s potential as a sentient and recompensible being, Old Marth enters into a relationship in which she can assist him, and be assisted by him, in the mutual particularities of their species. When the boys tried to attack Homer, Old Marth can vocalize in a language

they understand so as to scare them off; and when the boys would attempt to mess with or pull rusties on Marth, Homer could use his stealth and cunning to evade and taunt them. But when Marth moves beyond this mutual trust and attempts to anthropomorphize him (or, as it would at least seem by virtue of the cream, felinize him), she denies his particularities as a blacksnake and thus compromises his strengths. Therefore, Homer and Marth's relationship also follows the second pattern I've outlined (the domestic) because, whether consciously or not, Marth ultimately assumes dominion in the relationship, even if that dominion is the dominion of a caregiver.

These limitations on Old Marth and Homer's symbiosis are made apparent, in fact, in the first sentence of the story. As the narrator explains, "Old Marth claimed all the blacksnakes as hers," (1) and though we are meant to understand this protection and patronage as the benevolent alternative to the Murray boys' nihilistic violence, who for example "caught snakes and took them by their tails and cracked them like whips," when her relationship to the snake passes from the bounds of mutual protection to one in which she begins treating the snake as something other than a being sufficient to determine and maintain its own means of survival, she damns him to have both life and death determined by human intervention (1).

The third model of relationship we encounter involves the observatory stance of Bud. Though Bud is certainly "no partner" in the violence the Murray boys commit towards Homer, he is certainly participant in another limiting, masculinist pursuit: the divorced gaze of the scientific method. Our initial understanding of Bud is as a "spy" (Crabtree *Sweet Hollow* 1), whose code of conduct involves silence and a marked detachment from that

which he observes — a stance contrasted, in his opinion, with the narrator's compromising participations:

Bud said I told everything I knew. Maw said it, too. Because of this,
Bud never let me track over the hills with him.

He said, "She just can't keep from talking. She talks all along the
trace. If you talk, you don't get to know anything." (1)

This sentiment, out of context, doesn't come off as so egregious; in fact, one of the key spiritual lessons the narrator learns in the story is discretion, specifically the discretion to keep from Old Marth the knowledge of the particularly painful way in which Homer most likely died. So in that respect, what Bud says to his sister is fairly good advice. Still, the reader goes on to find that there is a distinct difference between Bud's and the narrator's knowledge: his is based on knowing patterns of action, while hers is based on participating in the knowledge of those she observes. To Bud, what the narrator does seems to be a messier, less effective model of acquiring knowledge; but because she never assumes a position of objectivity, she never risks objectifying the subjects she observes.

As an example of the difference between their ways of knowledge, consider that the only concrete statement we get from Bud (at least one that shows an observation of Homer beyond his position as a point of tension in a brother-sister tête-à-tête) is that after Homer's tail injury, he could "[a]mong the squiggles...see where his old stepped-on tail went" (5). But other than using Homer as a point of torment for his sister, there is little else we see out of Bud in either a positive or negative participation in Homer's existence. He is, for Bud, simply another curious object, and another pawn that causes movement for the true subjects of his voyeuristic observations: human beings. In fact, although Bud never is shown participating in

the Murray's direct violence, he is at one point shown taking a position of objectifying possessiveness over animal life:

Old Marth wouldn't have liked what Bud was carrying around in his pocket. I asked him what the small white rocks were that looked like they were rolled in salt.

“Blacksnake eggs. I found them under a rock up the ridge.” (2)

The narrator, on the other hand, engages in a participatory observation of nature, one wherein more than simply looking at animals from a detached perch, she lives with them and attempts to participate in their knowledge and empathize with what she perceives as their emotional lives. For the narrator, there are few distinctions between humans and non-human animals in aspects of personhood, and between non-human species there is little hierarchy, except of course for the particular focus on Homer. All figures are given a neutral explanation of their relationships and abilities, and by the end of the story almost every human is described in terms that could be considered snake-like. Bud, for instance, would “slink around the house...peep around the corner, and hiss” (2); and he would also molt: “[Homer] rolled [his skin] off wrong side out. Just like Bud shed his clothes” (3). In these descriptions, although Crabtree also at times anthropomorphizes Homer (though not often, actually, in a limiting way), she is most interested in reversing the anthropomorphic model, in seeing the commonality between human and non-humans, and the ways in which humans inhabit their animal natures.

Bud provides a fairly sharp contrast to his sister. In fact, as a fictional character Bud has a rather interesting extratextual history, being based at least in part on Crabtree's real life

brother⁵ (also named Bud), “who died at thirty in Hitler’s war” (Paradise 85). He appears in both of Crabtree’s published books, and in her non-fiction writing his “real” counterpart appears as a figure somewhat more in tune with the natural world than he comes across as in “Homer-Snake.” As Crabtree reminisces about their mutual adventures, she writes:

The great oak was mine too — my home perched high on great limbs among great branches. Here Bud and I played games like claiming trees and writing letters to the animals. Bud said he got an answer once. I wondered if he did. In this same world, shared by all, lived a mother vixen, her grey fox mate and their cubs, in a den among the great roots, spreading, protruding, from the ground. The four cubs, grey with white-tipped backs, chased their tails round and round the great oak until they fell dizzy over one another. With her long ears, the mother listened, hearing a mouse yards away. She would find the sound, leap and pounce, and carry dinner home to her cubs. (“Paradise” 82)

Such a scene complicates the rather easy dichotomy that the story sets up between boys and girls: women and girls, in the story, listen and learn; boys, in the story, observe and manipulate; and there are no men. Yet it would seem that Crabtree is trying to say something quite different than women good/men bad; rather, she is saying that essential education in the world must take into account female and animal perspectives. Otherwise, the knowledge one acquires will be imbalanced, and it can lead to either feelings of detachment or feelings of superiority than can engender unnecessary violence.

So the final model, of course, is that model of violence. Not the violence of the fox vixen feeding her children or of Homer eating his lunch (those are of quite a different

⁵ Interestingly enough, this isn’t the only parallel of real-life and literary names in “Homer-Snake”. According to Ballard and Hudson, Crabtree’s husband was “a farmer, Homer Crabtree” (141). I can only imagine the psychosexual potential of that fact, but that discussion doesn’t belong here. I’ll leave that gem for another critic.

nature), but rather the violence of the Murray boys, needless and nihilistic, licensed by the kind of pornographic detachment and gaze of ownership that Russell outlined, and which creates out of the animals of the story what Carol Adams would deem *absent referents*.⁶ In this story, males are not portrayed as inherently violent in all cases; because he has fallen under the influence of Old Marth, Bud can be known as “no partner in what happened” to Homer at his death (7). However, Crabtree paints violence as inherently masculine, or at least as masculinist. It is, for the Murray boys, the chief aspect of their identity, their path towards group cohesion, and their way of attacking female authorities and Marth’s feminist natureculture — thus reifying their domination, as men, over an othered natural world.

Crabtree also subverts dominant understandings of animal representation (and continues her exploration of violence) by performing an alternative exegesis on the standard Eve/Satan symbology of Christian mythos. In her version, Crabtree presents a feminist origin myth through heterodox symbology, in which the masculinist nihilism of “the Murray boys” replaces the Satan-snake of Genesis as the force which destabilizes the right order of the world’s original natureculture (1). In doing so, Crabtree imbues a traditionally Appalachian Christian ethic set, typified by its concern for the poor (in this case, the poor of all species) and in its attitude of stewardship and of limiting violence towards nature, with an architecture that is decidedly feminist and subversively esoteric. Instead of causing man’s downfall, in this reading of Eden, women represent its moral core, and the ideal of learning from and living with nature that typifies, throughout all of Crabtree’s work, solid moral standing.

The story’s structure overall is that of an inverted Eden, where women and animals are wounded (though not, in this version, corrupted) by the carnal knowledge of men, where Adam, so to speak, is the one who eats the apple first. Therefore, in the Eden myth that

⁶ For a fuller explanation of this term, again see Adams’ *Sexual Politics of Meat*.

Crabtree does uphold, its end for a modern, animal-conscious audience is that the human population is one inherently fallen and inherently under the grip of a systematic and self-serving pattern of unnecessary predatory violence, one which can only be overcome by a self-effacing empathy with the other.

In this way, the Murray boys are definitely the story's Satans; when we first encounter them, for example, they are described as a marauding band, with language that is distinctly like that found in the Old Testament book of Job:

[Old Marth] tongue-lashed the roving Murray boys, who went into people's barns and caught snakes and took them by their tails and cracked them like whips. This cracking broke the body of the snake and sometimes snapped off its head. It was terrible to see the Murray boys wring a snake around a few times, then give a jerk and off snap the head. (1)

Structurally, the "roving" of the Murrays goes on to take the form of three attacks, a number which mirrors the common structure of oral Appalachian folk tales, the tribulations of Job, and the temptations of Christ by Satan. And there are other parallels to the stories of Genesis, Job, and the Gospels as well. For example, when Bud "trailed" the Murrays "and watched [them] from the far edge of the woods on the top of the hill" as they kill Homer, he was like Peter during his denial of the crucified⁷, or like John in his witness to the Crucifixion (*Sweet Hollow* 7).⁸

This pattern of role reversals and Biblical allusions is why it is also possible to read Homer as definitely dying at the hands of the Murrays. In following the pattern of the Eden

⁷ John 19:26-27: "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." (New Revised Standard Version)

⁸ Luke 22:54: "Then they seized [Jesus] and led him away, bringing him into the high priest's house. But Peter was following at a distance." (New Revised Standard Version)

story, the narrator's vision of Homer places him in Christ's position in the metaphor of the bruised heel. The typical Christian interpretation of this prophecy in Genesis, in which God states that the offspring of Eve will "crush the head" of the serpent is that 1) the serpent is Satan, 2) Jesus will crush him, 3) this will come at end of the serpent "bruis[ing]" Jesus at his Crucifixion. The idea is that by attempting to commit violence upon Christ, the same force(s) that worked in the Satan-snake would bring a violence upon themselves that would destabilize their power and return the universe to its Edenic equilibrium.⁹ In the cosmology of "Homer-snake," the narrator's final vision of Homer in the field of daisies serves the same prophetic purpose (pointing forward toward a period of future equilibrium, in which the symbiosis of women and animals) through a patient outwaiting of the masculinist forces of violence and predation, and through a refusal to participate in a reductive domestication of either non-human animal or human female, we can return to the kind of world that appears at the beginning of the story.

At first, this inversion might seem to reach beyond the heterodox to the heretical, but the inversion or unfolding of a connection between Christ and snake is not unprecedented; even in the most orthodox Christian typologies, the brass snake of healing which Moses erects in the desert¹⁰ is read as a foreshadowing of Christ's redeeming act, a fact Jesus himself alludes to in the Gospels. And in the story itself, the narrator's final vision of Homer is undeniably positive and Paradisal¹¹:

⁹ Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁰ Numbers 21:9: "So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." (New Revised Standard Version)

¹¹ John 3:14-15: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (New Revised Standard Version)

I was delighted and looked a long while. I know I saw it. There placed in the maze of daisies he loved so well was Homer-snake. He stood upright on the end of his blunt tail and looking over the daisies, he laughed at me. (9)

This ending, actually, fits well with the allusions to the Gospels. If Homer-snake is a Christ figure, then the post-crucifixion parallels are evident. Homer-snake is alive, but keeps the wound marks he acquired in life, as Christ showed he did in his demonstration to St. Thomas.¹² Homer's closest female companion is the first to encounter him after his death, and does so in a garden-like setting (much like Mary's encounter of Jesus as the gardener when she goes to find and clean his body after the Crucifixion).¹³ And just as Mary ran home calling out to the only semi-receptive Apostles, the narrator runs home calling out only to her semi-receptive mother.

Moreover, the narrator's spiritual revelatory dream fits with some important trends in feminist theology, specifically Naomi R. Goldenberg's work on a "Feminist Appropriation of Jung" (from *Womanspirit Rising*). According to Goldenberg, almost every traditional religious system is constructed to the disadvantage of women, leaving them with some important choices as to what to do with their spiritual lives. They can either, she explains, "withdraw all energy from spiritual concerns and turn [their] attention to other matters," or else "devote a good deal of energy to maintain a religious view of life apart from [...] traditional religions" (Goldenberg 219-220). Obviously, she supports the second option, and explains that one of best methods for achieving this end is to participate in imaginative

¹² John 20:26-27: "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." (New Revised Standard Version)

¹³ John 20:15: "Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." (New Revised Standard Version)

reworkings of religion through access to dream and vision-language, specifically the dream manipulations outlined by Jung:

Revelation is not too strong a term to use to describe the religious insight Jung believed dream and fantasy provide. Later he encouraged his patients to do what he had done by letting their internal imaginary processes reveal their own religious direction. The revelation Jung encouraged in his patients was a sort that provided them with access to the spiritual processes at work in their own psyches independent of the religious processes endorsed by contemporary religion. (221)

As we have seen, Crabtree is a very creative re-imaginer of traditional images — whether they are the fabric of Christian origin story, portrayals of rural Appalachian childhood, or other primal things. Hers is a model of affirmation and integration, which calls us to see the natural world as breathing and teaching, and with dynamics which act independent of human interaction. And she shows that the human imagination, and our intuitive religious sense, is most affirmative and powerful when it is in touch with the lessons of this dynamic world. In this way, the final scene of “Homer-Snake” encapsulates Crabtree’s major themes.

“Price’s Bewitched Cow” and Good Witchcraft

If “Homer-Snake” is Crabtree’s key example of studying animals through the lens of realism, then “Price’s Bewitched Cow” is perhaps Crabtree’s best example of magical realism; or it is magical, that is, if we are inclined to be skeptical about the veracity of that magic. Whether we read this story skeptically or not, however, it is primarily a study of how

women exercise power. Specifically, it is an investigation of witchcraft, centering on the supposed bewitching and healing of one of the Price family's cows. The speaker, whom we can be fairly certain by her relationship to Bud and Old Marth and Maw is the same girl as the one in "Homer-Snake," begins the story by reflecting on the possible relationship between cows and witches:

Do cows have spells like humans? Witchcraft, whimsy or just plain lunacy?
The hill people believe in witches. If asked about this, they will deny it. But
they do. If people ask me, did I ever know a witch, I sure did. The most
important kind—one who could break spells. (11)

We learn a few things, not only about this story but about the speaker's storytelling in general, from this quotation. First of all, we continue to see how the narrator breaks the line between conventional understandings of human and animal limitations — allowing for cows to have not just witchcraft, but a *cow* witchcraft that is native to their own experience. Moreover, we begin to see the narrator's role as a commentator on the cultural conventions of a previous generation in her society (this role is especially evident in Crabtree's longest stories, "Little Jesus" and "Wildcat John.").¹⁴ What's most immediately important, however, is that the speaker develops a pattern of seeing witches not only in their stereotypical roles, but also (in fact, this is "[t]he most important kind" of witch) as healers (11). In doing so, she makes an implicit critique of long-standing Western views of the witch as evil or satanic.

The narrator continues by opening up the main problem of the story, describing the initial bewitching of Nannie as she looks at an old stump:

¹⁴ Although I don't refer to the term "autoethnography" here, I want to thank Donna Corriher for explaining her work with *autoethnography* in Appalachian Studies. Corriher defines the term this way: "Autoethnography is a radical, interdisciplinary merging of autobiographical and ethnographic writing that uses personal experience as a basis for understanding cultural patterns and phenomena (Corriher and Perry). Listening to her helped me a great deal in understanding this aspect of Crabtree's work."

The silence was broken by the clanging of the cowbell. Old Marth held her pipe in her hand and we turned to look.

“Heavens. What is wrong with Nannie cow?”

We stood up. Nannie stood looking up the hill where, in the sage grass, a stump had burnt black, years before, in a fire.

“She’s cutting a shine.”

Nannie, dear old cow, had never taken the stump into notice. Now with her tail standing over her back, she was circling the stump, stomping her feet and bellowing, her eyes popping out of her head. She stood gazing at the stump, snorting and blowing. I could see nothing, but certainly Nannie did, the way she was bugging her eyes. (13)

This scene marks the beginning of a series of strange patterns by Nannie, culminating in the inability of the Price family to churn butter from her milk. The events become so extreme, in fact, that Old Marth suggests that “Nannie saw the devil go into that stump,” an estimate with which many of the people in the community seem to agree (13). And after Nannie’s milk refuses to turn to butter seven times, the speaker explains that

People began to refer to Nannie Cow as Price’s Bewitched Cow. They remember that Nannie had seen the devil go into the black stump. People began searching their memories. There were recalls and exchanges. Someone remembered someone’s great grandmaw had a cow similarly afflicted over the hills in the back country when he was a child. (14)

Here we begin to see the real point of all of this: how the particular event of Nannie’s bewitching fits into a broader cultural lexicon. Witchcraft, for the people of Sweet Hollow,

becomes a pattern for explaining the medically unexplainable, as well as a tool for explaining and categorizing outstanding cultural memories. In this story, however, the title of witchcraft isn't used simply because the people lack scientific understanding; for as we soon find out, the witches of "Price's Bewitched Cow" are in fact very real.

At a first reading, the narrator seems to suggest that there are two witches in the story, the bewitcher Old Beck and the spellbreaker Old Angerine. The introduction of Old Beck comes first, then the introduction of Old Angerine:

Old Beck was a withered ninety years. She lived in a hut in a gloomy hollow, reputed as haunted, so visitors were few. Among the hill people Old Beck was both feared and respected. She was respected because she "doctored" as a midwife over the hills and hollows; she was feared because she was supposed to possess the powers of a witch...Now enters the second witch—Old Angerine, who liked Maw. If anyone would know what to do, she would. Old Angerine was in the high fields picking blackberries and coming in home with a bucket full, her split bonnet hanging by its strings, on her arm. The blackberries were black and beautiful as they lay heaped in the bucket. The sun glinted off the blackberries and when I looked into Old Angerine's eyes there was the same black glisten, all bright, luscious, and fruity. For this reason, whenever Old Angerine looked at me, I thought,

"Blackberry eyes." (15)

We have here almost a full taxonomy of ways in which witchcraft is presented in this story. It is, above all else, connected to women, which can be seen most readily in the moments of childbirth and fruit gathering that were traditionally the work of women. It is also culturally

defined; all of the descriptors of Old Beck, for example, refer to the community's interpretation of her actions (that she was "both feared and respected," that she was "supposed to possess the powers of a witch") rather than the actual content of any of the actions themselves (15). Moreover, the perception of a witch has as much to do with the perceiver's relationship to the witch as it does to the witch's true actions.

This connection, as priestess and writer Starhawk, whose essay on "Witchcraft and Women's Culture" (from *Womanspirit Rising*) explains, is a *partially* correct one, inasmuch that it connects the craft to women. As she explains, "[f]rom earliest times, women have been witches, *wicce*, 'wise ones'—priestesses, diviners, midwives, poets, healers, and singers of songs of power. Woman-centered culture, based on the worship of the Great Goddess, underlies the beginnings of all civilization" (260). So witchcraft is, at least in this general context, a women's work. That said, witchcraft, for the actual witches in the community of Sweet Hollow is not, as they imply, connected to devils and hauntings and the nefarious; nor is it nefarious or of the shadows simply because it is often practiced privately. Rather, witchcraft, as practiced by real *wicce*, is "earth religion," with a "basic orientation...to the earth, to life, to nature" (Starhawk 263). It is, in that sense, less about what the people perceive Old Beck as doing, casting evil spells from her haunted cabin in the shadows, as what the narrator actually sees Old Angerine doing: picking berries and living in deep connection with the earth.

What is actually happening at this point in the story is that Maw, who supposes that Old Beck has bewitched Nannie after she refused to let Beck "borrow some clabbermilk" for cheesemaking, goes to Old Angerine looking for a cure—or in other words, to have the spell broken (15). So the family goes to Angerine's house, where she is gathering medicinal herbs,

to begin a conversation about the problem. Before they come to this point, however (and as the narrator later explains, this is the typical procedure for business of this kind in the hills), they have to move through the preliminaries of visiting:

Now, on this particular day, [Old Angerine] had her apron rolled up around her waist, for she had gathered herbs like snake root, sassafras, and lobelia, the healing remedies she knew so well.

As the three of us walked downward on the trace, we came upon some golden seal growing. Old Angerine began gathering it into her apron.

“Here is some golden seal. Hold some in your mouth and chew on it.

Never mind the bitter taste.” (16)

Here we begin to see the *narrator’s* taxonomy of witchcraft develop. For the narrator, witchcraft is not an action with its own inherent moral value, but rather an action whose moral content is derived from its materials and purpose. In other words, there are good witches and bad witches — and what some might call, commonly, black magic and white magic. But even those distinctions are really an oversimplification of the portrayal of witchcraft in this story, as the figure we might be inclined to view as the bad witch, Old Beck, is indeed “respected” by the community because she worked “as a midwife” (15). The community, it seems, would like to separate this work from “the powers of a witch” that she was reputed to hold, but it becomes more and more obvious as we read the speaker’s description of what makes a witch that it is that very process of healing that is actually at the heart of witchery (15).

We know this because on our first encounter with Old Angerine, she is described in terms of her relationship to medicinal plants. The speaker, in fact, describes Angerine herself

in plant terms, when she comments on her “Blackberry eyes” (16). Moreover, her admonition to the speaker to “[n]ever mind the bitter taste” of the golden seal because of its medicinal qualities signals that the situation is a more complex one than simple stereotypes of magic will allow; what heals can be bitter, and those who seem to hold a rejected position in a community can also be those with the knowledge most necessary to sustain it. It isn’t a big stretch to suggest that these portrayals of witchcraft can in fact be read as metaphorical for the condition of women more broadly (16).

Moreover, the description of the meeting at Old Angerine’s bears some striking similarities to Starhawk’s descriptions of contemporary covens. Starhawk describes the meetings of witches’ covens as being defined by the combination of “moments of intense ecstasy and spiritual union...with moments of raucous humor and occasional silliness,” by the fact that it “takes place within a circle — a space considered to be “between the worlds,” the human world and the realm of the Goddess,” by being a space where “effective invocations...come to us spontaneously, out of the inspiration of the season,” where “psychic energy...[has] form and substance that can be perceived and directed by those with a trained awareness,” and finally where “[t]he power generated within the circle is built into a cone form, and at its peak is released—to the Goddess, to reenergize the members of the coven, or to do a specific work such as a healing” (265-66). In some sense, all of this happens in this meeting, even the gathering of a circle (so long as we find the circle and cone of energy in this story metaphorically, rather than literally).

For example, we see the discussion of the women weave around its subject before it directly lights on it. The moment has to build itself, as the figures create the space of community, the circle, that lets the healing work take place:

Finally, in a quiet lapse, Old Angerine said, “How air ye all? Who is sick? Is anybody dead? Whose time has come?”

Whose time has come? This question referred to midwifery. Any witch worthy of the name could catch babies. Both Old Beck and Old Angerine were called upon by the hill people to assist at bornings. Maw got Angerine to be the midwife when I was born instead of Old Beck. There may have been more competition than I know about between the two. (17)

The social construction of the moment is more than a formality, of course; there are real social consequences to the moment, not only in regards to the Price family’s immediate situation but also to the “competition” that the speaker alludes to (17).

But what’s perhaps more interesting to note here is that Maw Price and Angerine have an ongoing relationship, an indication that the work of witches may have been more central, and even more respected, by some members of the community than they might have wanted to admit. Angerine suggests by her questions that she does many kinds of work, that she is so to speak fluent in many discourses. Although the community might want to paint some of those skills or discourses in a bad light, Angerine certainly doesn’t see herself this way. One remembers, reading this passage, the “palpable distancing” that Locklear spoke of when she talked about how women’s knowledge alienated them from their communities (2). While this story might not have much to do with the “book learning” or textual literacy that Locklear focuses on, it certainly is a story about the power and position of contentious knowledge in Appalachia.

The message, however, is not about the distance or the alienation that knowledge creates, but rather its power. Angerine holds great power in this story, precisely because she

never seems to present or perceive herself through her stigmatization. Rather, she plays with, constantly making asides and jokes, especially to the children, that indicate that she knows how she's viewed as a witch, and isn't really taken aback by it. She has a moral center that transcends reductive paradigms; her focus is on doing her healing work. Those words *moral* and *healing* belong near each other, for when Old Angerine gives Maw Price the cure for the cow, she gives her both the spell to break the spell and a lesson about what caused the curse in the first place:

“My butter won't come [Maw says]. I believe my cow is bewitched.”

“Now that could easy be. You want a remedy. I know several. I'll see can I remember the one I got from my granny when she had your trouble. It is the best one. You have insulted someone. The question, who? And for you to study it up.”

“I'll try to think. I am desperate, everybody knows it. Now I couldn't even trade Old Nanny. Nobody would buy her.”

“Old Angerine pursed her lips, which looked brown like sticky hazel nut burrs. She looked sideways at Maw.

“Go home. Get some milk in the skillet and put it on the stove to boil. When it boils hard, stick it with a knife all over. A black cat may jump out.”

“With this last remark about a cat, Old Angerine cackled and looked at me and winked the blackberry lights in her eyes.” (18)

Angerine is a witch, and what she's talking about is a magic spell. It's meant to be carried out, and to do real work. That said, if magic spells were the only point of this exchange, or of this story, then there wouldn't really be much to comment on. But central to this story is a

moral element, the idea that along with the magic act an act of contemplation about guilt and insult also has to be carried out. Healing, for Angerine, is not just about magic, but also ethical interactions.

But, again, make no mistake: in the community of this story, the concept of witchcraft is also intimately connected to ideas about the power of women's bodies, about both what we take from them and what we fear about them. In the scene immediately after Angerine lays out the cure, we see another example of magical healing that reveals cultural attitudes about exactly these issues:

A visitor was coming toward the porch carrying a baby wrapped in quilts. The way it was covered, the baby was sick. The mother was wanting a cure from Old Angerine but felt lucky to find Maw. Mothers were always bringing their babies for Maw to breathe into their mouths and cure them of their tisc. Maw never saw her father. He died July 17 and Maw was born November 7. So the hill people thought Maw had this power. Maw herself did not believe in this cure, but she breathed into babies' mouths anyway. When the babies got well, they said it was because Maw cured them. (18)

Here we see an expansion of what witchcraft is, and who can be a witch. Witchery can be involuntary, beyond the control of the witch. And to the extent that any woman holds power in the absence of a man, she can be suspected of holding a witch's power. As the community believes, Maw holds this power because she "never saw her father;" in other words, she is one of those free from male influence; that is why her breath has the potency it does (18). This conception, by the way, holds a striking parallel to the Belenky group's conclusions about the ability of patriarchal authorities to student women's development

towards independent knowing — in other words, to the full development of their breath and voices.

It might seem at first that the nature scenes following the meeting at Old Angerine's are incongruous to the story, but they're not. Remembering what Starhawk says about the flow and dissipation (and the need for the dissipation) of energies after coven meetings, the release described in the following passage holds up well with her pattern for coven meetings. Moreover, by seeing how the children reflect Angerine's intimacy with nature, learning to know plants with the same authority she does, and by seeing how the narrator in particular asserts her position as a woman, and we begin to see just how influential the experience with Angerine has been on the children (even if the narrator doesn't mention her in this scene):

Going down the trace was not so tiring. I flew ahead of Maw, arms outflying like a bird. I leaped and skipped to come to full stop at a yellow moccasin flower. I would tell Bud about the moccasin flower though I suspect Bud already knew. We were honor bound to tell each other if we located moccasin flowers or lady's slippers. Bud claimed he was king of the yellow moccasin flowers. He let me be king of the pink lady's slippers. Bud said more properly I should be queen. I objected hotly to this lower rank, being already low on the numbers. . . .

Conservation was a word not yet in our vocabulary, but we were expert in our love and care. We did not break the flowers to carry them home. We talked and looked and counted, and heeled in the earth the precious seeds. Over the yellow moccasin flowers and over the pink lady's slippers, two kings stretched their arms. (19)

Having been in the presence of powerful women, here we see the speaker asserting power for herself. And having seen how power and magic come out of intimacy with the earth, both children cultivate their innate connections. Moreover, they show that they grasp an important lesson about power: being a king is not about taking control over things, “break[ing] the flowers” so to speak, but rather about the nurturing and stewardship of “talk[ing] and look[ing] and “count[ing]” (19).

Yet to move in short order to the end of the story, let it simply be said that Angerine’s cure works. It’s performed as she says to perform it, and as soon as it is, Nannie’s milk begins to turn again. But even after this, one final question still remains: just who was the witch who set the spell? Here is the speaker closing out the story with just that question:

Old Marth said, “Old Beck was the devil.”

Maw nodded but called no name while Old Marth chewed on the stem of her clay pipe. Then they both tried to change the subject to distract me. They talked about some lights Paw saw in the cedars and then how I could go to meeting next time to watch the women faint and throw their babies.

“Why did the women throw their babies?”

“What if no one caught the baby?”

“How can you get that happy?”

“What is the spirit?”

“Is everybody a witch?”

“How can I get to be a witch?”

Questions were endless. There was much talk. It made a good tale to tell up and down the hollows. How somebody put a spell on Price’s cow and

how Old Angerine broke the spell. Maw kept telling me not to say anybody's name and break our good luck.

Who? Who was the witch who put the spell? Everybody knew.

Everybody talked. I knew for sure and I do to this day. (22)

So just why does the speaker state so emphatically that she knows who the witch was when all of the context clues are pointing to Old Beck? Maybe it all comes back to the first line of the story, "Do cows have spells like humans?" (11). One plausible reading of the story is that Nannie cow herself is the witch and bewitcher who broke the story's spell. Rather than being enchanted by the "devil" Old Beck, it's possible, given the context clues in the story, that Nannie cow bewitched her own milk in order to spur Maw on to the realization that she had insulted Old Beck, and for her to confront that fact by consulting Old Angerine.

But that's more speculation than interpretation. Perhaps the bigger mystery of the story, the ending riper for creative interpretation, is the series of questions that the speaker asks her mother at the end. It seems apparent from these six questions that the speaker is developing a sense of magic and miracle as connected; she doesn't see what goes on in the church, and what goes on at Angerine's, as separate paradigms. In both places, whether directly from God or indirectly from the earth, women receive power to do spiritual and healing acts. Moreover, witchcraft for the speaker isn't an activity of the shadows; it may be mysterious, but it's not abnormal. She perceives that maybe "everybody is a witch," and by her last question, she seems to indicate that it might not be, in her mind, such a bad thing to be (22).

From this discussion emerge some very important connections between this story and Crabtree's broader themes, and between this story and the broader field of criticism we've

been engaging. Simply put, this story shows how the natural world gives power to those who become fluent with it, and participate with it. It shows that powerful women, women with literacy and knowledge, traditional or untraditional in form, can be frightening to their communities; but more importantly, it suggests that their stigmatized position doesn't override their potential to provide immensely positive and important services to that community. And, finally, it shows that one of the most important things a woman can have in her life if she's to grow up to be a confident and powerful woman herself, is access at an early age to women exactly like Maw Price and Old Angerine.

"The Jake Pond" and the "Web" of Life

Although Crabtree's shortest published story, and the one which, at least at first, seems to be the one in which the least actually happens, "The Jake Pond" is perhaps Crabtree's clearest expression of her ecological vision, and it is the short story in which she most fully explores how the earth educates us.

Because of this, it's particularly useful to read this story in light of Awiakta's "Daydreaming Primal Space." In the sections relevant to "Homer-Snake," Awiakta claims that while many "European settlers" to Appalachia "feared the wilderness, the "savages" who lived there, and the amorphous power of the intuitive both represented," other Europeans either agreed proactively, or were otherwise influenced by, a Native perception of the natural world (193-194). These Europeans, she explains, "liked living in the round," and following the lead of the Cherokee nation, "looked at everything three times, with a twinkle" (193). In other words, they thrived in their relationship with the other living beings around them, and

they always understood that life could never be fully understood with just reason and objectification.

Crabtree is one of those Europeans who lived in the round. That fact becomes evident in this story partly for its use of the motif of circles and cycles, and partly because the boy at the center of the story, the observer and student of the Jake Pond, is so often put on an equal par with plants with animals, as just another citizen of the pond. For example, when the boy “stop[s] to look at his image in the pond,” the narrator describes what is looking back at him is not himself but “reflections of cedar trees and locust blooms, amid a blue sky, full of tiny, white sheep clouds, changing places and chasing each other” (69). That is, of course, a description that indicates the angle of his vision—he is not bending directly over the water, but Crabtree’s wording associates the boy with the beings he observes, which suggests that he is those things himself.

This fungibility comes to characterize the boy’s thinking, and as he watches his neighbors on the pond, he often puts himself in their shoes. For example, after hearing a pair of deer in the woods, he imagines, as the author explains, what it would be like to be one:

A female deer talked to her fawn up in the cedar thicket. The boy had never seen the deer, but he had seen tracks coming down to the pond’s edge.

Sometimes he had felt wide eyes upon him from the thicket. He wondered what it would be like to be a deer and live in a thicket. (70)

Species and gender and season are ever shifting on the pond; empathetic coexistence, the commonality of life passages, and being attuned to natural changes (that is, that all on the pond experience birth and Spring and rain and sun together) is what truly forms the Jake Pond’s constancy.

In Crabtree's published fiction, perhaps no story represents her understanding of nature better than "The Jake Pond" where the supposed binaries of nature (male/female, solar/lunar, human/animal, animal/plant, pastoral/feral, and Western/native) dissolve, and Crabtree treats them as cooperative rather than competing realities. Everything is circular, in the web of the seasons, and the solar, human, agricultural, and Western understandings (recognized and affirmed as correct visions of life) is engrafted with the lunar, animal, feral, and Native understandings (also recognized and affirmed as correct visions of life). In this way, Crabtree's move is not to flip but dissolve the distinctions of dominant binaries.

These two themes, the cyclical nature of life on the pond and the commonality between all species, begin to coalesce as the story reaches its climax:

Sometimes the boy circled the whole of the pond, walking all the way around it. With a stick he tried to hook and bend toward him some cattails he wanted to hold. But he could never bend them quite far enough to touch. He would give up and meander after the dragonfly, for it, too, circled the pond...

A boy and a dragonfly, some blue butterflies and a wild duck, each made his own minuscule circle, as life around the pond went on. (71)

In this section, the boy fails when he attempts to master the pond. He fails to "bend toward him" not just the cattails specifically but also the patterns of the pond more broadly. He cannot learn from the pond while in separation from its life. He has to invest himself in the citizenship of that place, to be simply another one among its living peoples.

But once he learns that lesson, once he integrates himself into that life, the pond can teach him, mold him, and instill in him those same resources that Crabtree herself mentioned

the natural world provided her as she had to navigate the social worlds of human beings. As the narrator indicates near the conclusion of the story,

The pond was a book of life with the boy as the learner. As he studied the dirty scum clinging to the pond's edge, the scum broke apart then came together again, with sometime teeming and alive. By reaching out a hand's length the boy could touch saw grasses. Ferns grew on the cool northern banks. Up the hill were the pines and higher up the inclines were the hardwood oaks. Here was the whole history, the whole life cycle of the plant kingdom, from algae through the hardwoods. The boy was part of all this, but it would be years before he would find it in a book. Here by the pond, the book of life was opened wide concerning the flowering time and the spreading of seed and the falling and bedding of leaves, and the boy was no intruder.

(72-73)

These three ideas—that all life is interconnected, that all of life's patterns are cyclical, and that often the truest knowledge lies outside of human discourse—undergird this story, and these ideas connect it to the broader relationship Crabtree has with the theorists we've been investigating. This knowledge can serve as a counterbalance to the institutional pressures lined out by Belenky; this knowledge, this literacy, allowed Crabtree to access other literacies without experiencing the same traumatic loss of identity that other Appalachian women have had to endure; this knowledge connects Crabtree to the larger ecofeminist tradition in Appalachian writing. This knowledge informs the totality of her spiritual worldview; and this knowledge, especially of our cyclical interconnectedness, places her in

the same community of thought as a writer like Awiakta, which truly distinguishes her literary and philosophical contributions.

Chapter Three

The River Hills and Beyond: Women Revisioning

In addition to her stories, Crabtree is also the author of drama and poetry. In fact, she is most widely known and publicized as a poet, with most of her publications and interviews centering on her work in that area. Crabtree's poetry is more formally and thematically experimental than her published prose; and although the stories provide novel and syncretic answers to deep social and political and religious questions, and they are perhaps at times more aesthetically rich (there is certainly a larger *stylistic* vocabulary in the stories than in the poems), the poems truly reveal the diversity of Crabtree's thinking, and her fullest voice.

This study will consider eight of the poems from Crabtree's *The River Hills and Beyond*: "Smith Creek No. 1," "Smith Creek No. 2," "Kudzu," "He Cut My Garden Down," "Devil's Den Hollow," "Noah's Animals," "Learning," and "Of Circles." These poems complement the themes of the three stories discussed—most of them, with the possible exception of "Learning," take place mostly in nature, but they also present elements of Crabtree's writing that those stories don't. The speakers of *The River Hills and Beyond* are generally older than the speakers of *Sweet Hollow*, and are more racially and socially and intellectually diverse. Most, however, are women, and most come out of similar circumstances or deal with similar issues as the characters in the stories do. Because the speakers are older, and because the poetic form allows for it, Crabtree is able to be far more explicit in her depictions of women's struggles and problems than in the stories where

children are present (although she is, for many of the same reasons, rather explicit in “Holy Spirit” and “Wildcat John”).

More important, however, is that these poems help to fill in the gaps of Crabtree’s literary vision and give us a more complete vision of her worldview and her writing. In the “Smith Creek” poems, we get a glimpse into the domestic difficulties that she only mentions or writes around in her other work. In “Kudzu” and “He Cut My Garden Down,” we see the darker side of Crabtree’s ecological vision, and what happens when societal interference and domestic violence separate women from the connections that sustain them; in “Devil’s Den Hollow,” we find a corollary to the vision of “Homer-Snake,” another vision of that relationship between people and snakes that comes up again and again in Crabtree’s work; in “Learning,” we find a supremely comic vision, a testimony from a woman who has come through the challenges of life and constructed a healthy self on the other side; and, finally, in “Of Circles,” we get a small glimpse into the cosmic experimentation that characterized Crabtree’s final and by many rumors greatest work.

“Smith Creek No. 1” and “Smith Creek No. 2”: Nature as Consolation

No poem in *The River Hills & Beyond* is as direct in its critique of gender as “Smith Creek No. 1.” In this poem, however, it is the process rather than the person that serves as the enemy, patriarchy and not the patriarch that the speaker attacks. For although Crabtree (and it’s hard to imagine any other speaker for this poem than Crabtree herself) “loathed the likes of Smith Creek,” she notes that she held at least some agency in her decision to live that life, for as she says she “followed [her] husband” there (*River Hills* 3). So while the poem’s wording might suggest that the script of Crabtree’s early middle life was determined by her

husband, and that she held the ancillary position in their relationship, she doesn't seem to blame that fact on him; she at least does not blame him directly.

In fact, she is rather direct in pointing out that Homer Crabtree himself had limited agency himself, noting that in the process of widowhood "my husband [was] taken" (3) She highlights this fact even more directly in the poem "Husband," where she notes that "for all his years we were / under eyes, taboos, codes" and that only "as I helped him / with his bath / when the liver cancer / had him" did she ever see him fully naked (8).

Whether that poem is factually accurate to the events of Crabtree's life doesn't so much matter. What matters is that she frames this period of her life as one of serious limitations, ones brought on not so much by the particular relationships between men and women as by the scripts and gender roles that men and women are supposed to fulfill. In Crabtree's own estimations, Homer Crabtree always comes across as a truly decent if somewhat old fashioned man, in no sense overbearing or abusive or (deliberately) oppressive. But the life of those years, as she iterates over and over again, was very hard. The narrator of "Smith Creek No. 1," whether she represents Crabtree or not, isn't happy; and the situation of her marriage and domesticity has something to do with it.

With this in mind, it can be easy to read "Smith Creek No. 2" as a retraction of "Smith Creek No. 1," as a rhetorical retreat or a capitulation to hegemony. The grievances of the first poem seem legitimate, and the apologies of the second poem seem less about regret for overstating a case than about an embarrassment on taking so strong a stand, even if it was correct. "Smith Creek No. 2," however, may be read not as a rhetorical retreat but as a rhetorical revision, not as a move by Crabtree away from confronting problems in the lives of

herself and other women, but rather as a move towards a new rhetorical structure, one that seeks to heal as well as blame.

Whereas the language of the first poem is social and pastoral, focused on other people and on the working life of the farm, the second poem is private and wild, focused on the intimate relationship and on the life of the natural world. In opening the poem, which Crabtree notes was written after “feeling bad about writing ‘Smith Creek No. 1’,” the speaker appeals with nostalgia for a different understanding of those years, one steeped in the “mysterious dark” of an erotic experience of the natural world:

Calling back

Those years of planting harvesting

Breathing touching among our meanderings

In and out of lives where we pursued

All strange and wonderful things

Down deep into the mysterious dark

Where the roots wind about the heart. (5)

Whereas in “Husband,” the speaker suggests that she and her husband never got to see each other naked, the speaker of this poem explains that nature provided the social space where love (including physical love) could be fully expressed, as that space provided a proper social context. And yet, even more than that, the difficulties of the Smith Creek life are mitigated by memory, and by the connection of that place to similar places in easier times:

I laugh to see Bud drive the cows across the creek,

Lifting their tails to let go.

A bee is hanging to a catkin. Nearby

A red salamander from his frozen sleep
Creeps around his winter bed of rock,
the warm sun drenching him
As my lover drenches me with delight. (5)

In these lines, Crabtree refers to both memory and the equality between species. She makes little difference between the “red salamander” in his experience and the human lovers in theirs; rather, she emphasized the space itself, and its capacity to sponsor the full inhabitation of bee or salamander or human experience.

Moreover, the speaker reminds herself, in considering the actual landscape of these memories, of the cyclical and seasonal experience of reality—the same kind of cyclical, webbed experience that Awiakta emphasizes so strongly in her work, and which the protagonist of the “The Jake Pond” learns from his schooling by the water. As the speaker concludes in her poem, death is not always truly death, nor is the experience that we remember as linear and unrelenting always so. Rather, pain and the trials of human experience and even death itself *are* relenting experiences, even if they are legitimately difficult ones to deal with, as the final images of the poem imply:

In the pawpaw patch and opossum
Hangs by his tail to the limb, playing dead.
He is not dead.
Now he is hanging to my finger.

...

In Smith Creek, a scarlet leaf floats round and round. (5-6)

By now, it's becoming obvious that these three concepts—the relief from social stress found in nature, the identity of experiences of loss and pain as learning moments, and the cyclical (and therefore redemptive) nature of existence—are among Crabtree's strongest and most explicit themes. This vocabulary of understanding, at the heart of things, suggests how Crabtree's intimacy with the natural world allows her to move past the problems of personal development lined out by the theorists in this study. Because rather than simply being a vehicle for the limited escape of the Belenky group's level of "subjective knowing," or a space where Crabtree and/or her speakers can retreat from the literate discourses of the outside world, Crabtree transforms a place like Smith Creek, with all of the inherent difficulties of the memories made there, into part of that which allows her to "stand apart...observing the diversity of life's systems," as she puts it, part of that which allows her, in the end, to survive and eventually shape her fullest self (*Bloodroot* 81).

"Kudzu": Parable of Death and Rebirth

"Kudzu" on a first reading may seem like something of throwaway or a piece of morbid playfulness after the biographical intensity of the early poems in *The River Hills and Beyond*. But it is actually one of the most important pieces in the collection, a model for Crabtree's understanding of the transformation of women's identities. The speaker of the poem is a frustrated older woman, similar to the speaker of the "Smith Creek" poems, possibly a version of Crabtree herself. The plot of the narrative poem is that this speaker is found "dead / sitting upright in [her] chair," and "wound in kudzu vines" (10). She's still speaking, of course, from beyond the grave (rather a literal or implied one is unsure); and the brunt of what she says is that the community she has left still cannot figure her out. "They

asked questions,” she says, and “made excuses,” wondering “[d]id the kudzu do this, / strangle, / choke her to death,/ wind her in this cocoon?” (10). These people also consider, however, that the vine growth might have happened after her death, rather than having caused it, noting that “[s]he died first, perhaps, sitting in her chair” (10). For these neighbors, the death can be easily separated from its context, a fact that leads them to misinterpret what they see. For the speaker, however, everything in the scene is interconnected, and what the neighbors “could never know / was how the kudzu / fit [her] life” (10).

At first, this poem does indeed seem to have more to do with death itself than with the message behind its circumstance. But if we consider a few unstated facts about the poem, particularly kudzu’s relationship to Appalachian ecology, then some broader implications begin to show themselves. The most important fact about kudzu, of course, is that it is a plant not native to Appalachia, having been originally sourced here as a potential cow feed and guard against erosion.¹⁵ The plant grew rather aggressively in the Appalachian climate, however, and it turned out to be both impractical as a feed source and impossible to eradicate from the landscape. As such, it has become a staple trope image in the Appalachian consciousness, a symbol at once for the encroachment of outside influences on the region and for the adaptive fecundity of Appalachians in adapting to and assimilating those processes.

With this in mind, it is perhaps better to read “Kudzu” as a poem about social and cultural death, rather than literal death. The speaker does seem to relate almost antagonistically to the “they” that she describes, allowing them to be the eyes that see most of the scenes of the poem, but insisting that they are almost entirely wrong in their assumptions about what they see. Moreover, there seems to be an implied distinction

¹⁵ Thanks to Dr. Ballard for cluing me in to this second use of the plant. For further reading, consider the following source: <http://plants.ifas.ufl.edu/node/354>.

between modernity and antiquity in the poem, between being an Appalachian speaker and being aware of the stereotype of the little old mountain lady in the rocking chair. Consider for a moment that of the first five stanzas of the poem, four begin with the word "they," every one except for the second. In that stanza, the speaker herself highlights the image, noting that "[t]he kudzu made a mound / of my house and car," ensuring that the community "did not find me / for a while" (10). For some reason, the community finds it easier to locate the woman by acknowledging the stock image, the little old lady sitting in her chair, than by finding her through the modern part of her experience, that of the independent woman with her own house and car. Now, they did search for her, of course, by initially looking for that latter image, but the point is that they couldn't find her that way. They had to slip back to the known.

But that isn't their real failure. As the speaker concludes, what the searchers really fail to understand "was how the kudzu / fit my life" (10). This statement has a number of implications. First, it indicates that the speaker accepts and relates to the kudzu; there is something in its nature she shares. And that certainly makes sense if we think of the speaker as a kind of Crabtree. For, although Crabtree was an Appalachian native (and I think very few people would consider her fecundity overgrown or parasitic), she did travel outside of the region, bringing outside knowledge and other non-native elements back to Appalachia. Moreover, kudzu's identity is hybrid, for certainly by this point in its ecological history, the plant has taken an indelible place as part of the community. Crabtree's speaker is a hybrid personality as well, refusing to choose between images of modernity and antiquity (she is, in the end, both the modern Appalachian woman and the elder in the rocking chair), and

refusing to have her death left open to the institutional or heard opinions of the community. Furthermore, according to the poem, the persona is not simply dead but in a “cocoon” (10).

That word, “cocoon,” is perhaps the most important word of the poem, the key to understanding just what it is about this woman that her observers can’t understand. The process of an animal cocooning implies a transmogrification, a change into another form that involves a kind of death. Since most animals make their cocoons out of parts of what they already were (i.e., through their secretions), it makes sense that the creation and breaking of the cocoon implies a rather complicated relationship to the material of one’s life, a stance towards it that is simultaneously utilitarian and antagonistic. In other words, kudzu makes an appropriate cocoon for the speaker because it represents her former life, an Appalachian life complicated by a complex relationship to the outside world and by a relationship to a community that cannot fully understand that other relationship.

So perhaps the people of the poem, rather than the kudzu, kill the speaker in whatever literal sense she dies. The third stanza, in particular, could certainly be read that way. For, if the vines have already done their work, then it could be little assumed that they were “choking” her any longer; it takes no more than an implied comma to suggest that it is the searchers themselves who are “pushing through the window” (10). The words “following, following” also seem to suggest that the searchers are mimicking the path of the kudzu, following it along its path until they find the body of the speaker. So, if “the kudzu / fit my life” and the kudzu “choke[d] her to death,” and the people followed and observed the kudzu, can it not also be implied that the community choked her to death as well? While they seem genuinely concerned with finding her and figuring out what happened to her, they also “made excuses” for the death and chalked it up to having little to do with the process of kudzu or

choking (10). Could they perhaps not see that their tendency to want to define and bring closure to her life, to search for pat answers for her even in the face of extraordinary circumstances, was in itself a kind of choking limitation? Should we assume that the overgrowth of kudzu around her was a magically fast event? Or should we assume that the relationship of the community to the speaker, in addition to being one of attempted ownership of identity, was also one of a certain neglect, a combination that is, all too sadly enough, a tangible reality for many older people?

And these aren't even the most important questions the poem poses. Most important, so far as I can determine, is this question: what will the speaker become in her new life if, in fact, that possibility is what the cocoon of the poem implies? She will become a hybrid amalgamation of everything that was wrapped in the kudzu — she will become the “house and car,” the modern person, the super-fecund byproduct of cultural exchange; she will become the chair and image associated with it, she will become antiquarian Appalachia as much as she is modern Appalachia; and she will become the kudzu itself, hybrid and impossibly fertile. This is because the “kudzu . . . fit [her] life,” and in fitting her life, enveloped and touched everything around her, *except* for her search party (10). So what she will not become, however, is one of those searchers, one-track minded, neglectful, uneager to read into the meanings of what they see, and ultimately left out of the regenerative loop.

“He Cut My Garden Down”: Resisting Abuse

“He Cut My Garden Down” is a poem about domestic abuse. The abuse of women, sexual or otherwise, is a topic that comes up more than once in Crabtree's work: almost unquestionably in her story “Holy Spirit,” quite possibly also in the poem “Playmates.” The

depiction of abuse in Crabtree's work, however, often remains ambiguous, mostly because she obfuscates any depictions of violence and most depictions of sex acts. And yet what the man does to the woman in this poem is perhaps the most abusive act described in all of Crabtree's work, a fact that Crabtree emphasizes, rather than diminishes, by making the object of the abuser's violence the woman's garden rather than her body.

In the poem, the abuser (it's left uncertain as to whether he was the speaker's husband or lover or partner), ostensibly in an outburst of anger and quite possibly while drunk, destroys the speaker's garden. Beyond simply being an insult or a direct attack on the speaker, the act is particularly problematic because, as the speaker explains, it diminishes her ability to provide for her children,

making it so
the boy hung to me
past his years
my blue drop of milk
barely passing
the blue of his lips. (17)

This image is a particularly important one, because it points out that the disconnection from nature has just as much of a negative impact on men as it does on women. The boy's "blue...lips" are just as blue as the mother's "drop of milk," and the boy's inability to grow fully is just as chronic as hers (17). Although this study emphasizes the traditional connection women have been assumed to have to the natural world, and also the special connection that Crabtree had to the natural world that allowed her to survive as a woman in contemporary Appalachia, that connection is neither limited to women nor somehow *more* essential to their

health than it is to men or transgendered people. It's simply a more obvious connection because of our cultural traditions, and because of that an especially useful source for women as they challenge cultural limitations and seek to develop their fullest selves.

At least in the single life of the woman at the heart of this poem, the violence that severed her from her connection to nature certainly had harsh consequences for her ability to provide for and nurture her children as a mother, and for her ability to develop a community with the other women in her life. As the speaker goes on to explain, her lack of food eventually forces her to make her daughter leave home:

I walked the girl
seven years is young
to be put with strangers
her dangers clamped on me
I walked her on the high ridge
until I saw a house in the far valley
“Go there,
Go to that house. Try to stay the winter.”
I watched her go in the snow
until she was a dot through the gate. (17)

In both the stanza with the boy and the stanza with the girl, Crabtree emphasizes how the children kept close to their mother, attempting to draw on her for support, as the words “hung” and “clamped” suggest (17). But because of the man's violence, and of no will or desire of her own, the speaker is pushed into a space (“hung to me / past his years,” “her

dangers clamped on me”) where she can’t answer those calls, and where she can’t be the provider they need (17).

In this way, the speaker truly is the silent woman that the Belenky group discussed. Pushed to the limits of her ability to cope, and cut off from the resources that would empower her, the speaker of “He Cut My Garden Down,” even in the face of this most abject violence, downplays the effects of the violence upon herself, noting that

[i]t was not the women in town
or the liquor
or my crocheted doily he snatched
off the mantle
and burned in the stove

that were truly the most horrible aspects of what her abuser did to her, but rather the effects of that violence on her relationships to the people around her (17).

As the speaker concludes, this violence not only injured her, but also left an injury and bitterness and silence that is not resolved at the poem’s end. And though her anger suggests that there is the possibility for resistance and that her speaking out against the situation moves her beyond her silence, she is left unfulfilled the poem’s end and she might continue on that way perpetually. The abuser, as she explains, is dead, and as Crabtree notes at the end of the collection, the speaker changes her pronouns in the final lines of the poem so that she does not directly speak ill of the dead (18).

As dire as the situation of this poem is, and as little hope as it might leave for the speaker, it was important for Crabtree to include this vision and possibility in her work. Not every woman escapes violence, and not every woman is able to access the resources that

will allow her to thrive. That reality, however, serves to reinforce Crabtree's view and the need for women to have access to the resources and safe spaces that allow them to develop their identities, earth connections, and spiritual contexts.

"Devil's Den Hollow": Revision of "Homer-Snake"

"Devil's Den Hollow" is the poetic counter-point to "Homer-Snake," and its most important aspect is that it complicates the gender dichotomy of that story, rendering the "real" Bud as someone other than a detached observer of nature, and problematizing a young Lou Crabtree's view of nature as far more sensationalized, romanticized, and detached than the view of the protagonist of the story. In that sense, "Devil's Den Hollow" provides the interior to the exterior of "Homer-Snake": the poem offers the remembered "real" experience that forms the source material for the story. Whereas the story, whose genre might have led to flights of magical realism, is narrated in strikingly naturalistic terms, this poem about snakes contains both folklore and magic.

This difference might exist because, unlike in "Homer-Snake," the actual observation of the snake remains undone until the speaker "was *grewed*" (23). Before then, in the world where "Bud said he had been" but "hadn't," snakes were the "devil's dust bag," the "devil's darning needle," and the dinner of "a clubfoot dwarf"; in short, their meaning was mythological, and references to them meant danger — a danger that should always remain foreign, but is in fact native (23). For the adult speaker, however, while the snake was still a concern, it was not "of the devil," but rather "[j]ust danger to bare feet" (23). After the narrator actually sees the snakes, she is still fascinated by them, and they're still worthy of that fascination.

Even after this realization, though, the poem is still more about magic than disillusionment. It is also about how we understand the stories of our childhood after the fact, about how we reinterpret those stories in the face of new knowledge and new literacies, and how we (with a nod here to Locklear's work) attempt to reclaim what literacy can cause us to lose. As the speaker explains, her knowledge of snakes expands after she actually encounters them, shifting from an understanding of snakes as magical and devilish, the minions of a "clubfoot dwarf" who "had a snake pit / and ate rattlesnakes," to an actual population that had flourished in the woods after a real farmer let some loose in a real accident (23). Yet, as she writes to Bud years after the fact, the snakes are no less fascinating and, in their way, no less magical — even if the first stories about them weren't literally real. For as she tells him,

The pupils in the snakes' eyes
stand straight up
finding heat and striking out.
They got cameras in their brains
and take pictures of you.
They lie on branches of trees;
they sun themselves on rocks;
they entwine around huckleberry bushes;
they slither over rocks;
even goats stand up on top of cliffs. (24)

Although snakes are not devilish, not supernatural, they are powerful, dangerous, and impossibly various and interesting. They have patterns, relationships, and even their own kind of physical technology. More than anything else, they can still evoke or elicit the same

awe-inspiring response in the speaker that they did in fantastic story form when she was a child. In fact, the reality she describes is almost rendered more palpable and more powerful because it is based on physical experiences. And still, in spite of the fact that the snake stories have lost one kind of meaning, the stories contain a connection to that childhood that the speaker and Bud experienced together. For as she concludes, calling for Bud to “Hurry home,” the snakes are still out there, still waiting for them to encounter them together (24).

“Noah’s Animals” and “Women’s Work”

“Noah’s Animals,” one of the longest poems in *The River Hills and Beyond*, seems almost like an inevitability for Crabtree, but there is nothing else quite like it in any of her published work. Where other stories and poems have lifted tropes from local folklore or the Bible, “Noah’s Animals” is the only piece among Crabtree’s published work that deals directly with a biblical story and manipulates it for its entire length (“Little Jesus” covers similar ground in its way, but the direct emphasis on the Nativity scene forms only a section of the story, and even then it is more representative of Appalachian Christian folk culture than of the Biblical narrative itself).

What makes “Noah’s Animals” unique is that, in spite of its title, the real focus of the poem is on “Mrs. Noah,” the person who has to do most of the daily work of animal keeping while Noah gets glory in his position as a patriarch. The narrative poem is meant to be funny, certainly, and for the most part Noah is rendered as more bumbling and oblivious of the extent of the work Mrs. Noah has to do than he is as crass or deliberately uncaring, but the point is still the same: behind every great patriarch is a woman sweeping up elephant poop.

The poem begins at the end of the Flood, with Noah and his family escorting the animals off the ark. As Mrs. Noah helps with this work, she starts to reminisce over the events of the past few months:

Noah's wife flapped her apron
to shoo along the winged things.
Then Mrs. Noah stood still:
she stood real still,
In that old rotting ark that was waterlogged,
with a leaking roof
and all her buckets full of rain water.

...

A young buffalo calf passed by.
Mrs. Noah remembered the black bundle
that was the buffalo calf
dropped in the early morning. (35)

What is important to see here (and in some ways what makes the poem a heterodox interpretation of the Bible story in Genesis) is that the animals in the ark were sustained not solely by the miraculous, although the poem does register that as a reality of the situation, but also by Mrs. Noah's particular care. The "leaking roof" suggests an intensity of work and hardship, and the fact that it was "her buckets" that kept the leaks from overmuch affecting life on board identify her key role in the domestic life of the ark (35). In other words, although the poem suggests that the nature of man and (male) animals could shift during the voyage, the nature of woman (and female animals) could not (35). The men animals could

stop being violent, but the women could not stop their daily work, breastfeeding children and cleaning the ship.

In fact, rather than subsiding, the socially and physically female aspects of Mrs. Noah, as well as all of the other female animals on board, are amplified during the experience, as the scene of their mutual responsibility in nursing attests:

Mrs. Noah washed and eased the buffalo mother,
her strutted udder caked with milk,
the lifesaving milk.

The smell of milk buds floated through the air.

...

Who was nursing off of whom was of no concern. (35)

Though it doesn't say so explicitly, do these lines suggest that Mrs. Noah herself breastfed some of the animals on board, including that newborn buffalo? The implication is that mothers on the ark fed the young ones.

Yet the poem indicates the experience of Noah's family was *somewhat* different than it was for the animals: the animals experienced "bornings and no dyings." As the poem suggests, Noah and Mrs. Noah had to do work that kept them from some of their own natural activities:

[Noah] looked toward Mrs. Noah
and his man nature was coming back,
from under the dispensation,
for five months is a long while.

"Woman, this quietness is great, by jinks. (36)

Apparently, while “the dispensation” allowed for the non-human animals on board to have sex, Noah and wife had to refrain because of their duties as caregivers. But sex really isn’t the point, here; that detail is included merely to allude to the larger point: that for Mrs. Noah, the work of the ark and dispensation of caregiving was decidedly *not* over. As the poem explains,

Mrs. Noah did not feel delivered
from any covenant.

“Don’t be getting any ideas.

Who is going to clean up this mess?” (36)

So women’s nature (or, more accurately the nature that is constructed for them circumstantially) is the state of constant caregiving, the state of constantly having to “clean up this mess” (36). Perhaps the sharpest joke of the poem, and its real commentary on gender, is that for the man of the poem to suspend his “man nature,” to focus on the community at large, to live the life of domestic caregiving, and to not foreground the sexual act over the consequences of that act, it required a miraculous dispensation at the hands of God (36). The woman of the poem, Mrs. Noah, assumed caregiving was her responsibility. This interpretation also calls upon readers to understand that the poem is satirical—and the satire points toward what the dominant culture considers to be the social standard, as the arrangement which Noah and Mrs. Noah’s partnership certainly is.

What’s really at play here, and where the poem really stings, is in its suggestion, implicit as it is, that forcing women into the unmitigated work of the domestic numbs them to the experience of the miraculous around them and keeps them from the full experience of themselves in the moments they inhabit. For, in the face of God’s miraculous intervention at

the end of the flood, Mrs. Noah cannot spend any time focusing on it, but rather must focus only on the immediate task at hand:

She looked at the black hole in the roof,
 where some blue sky was showing,
 But this window to heaven did not impress Mrs. Noah.
 She was assembling her brooms and mops
 and tightening up her apron strings,
 and heading toward her buckets and tubs,
 Full of rainwater from that old leaking roof. (36)

Even in the face of the miraculous, the daily work of living must go on.

Some might ask, of course, just what Mrs. Noah is doing cleaning up an ark that will no longer be of any use. If the dispensation of the poem is over, why does she need to stay in the place she is, cleaning up what will never be used again? The answer, of course, might well be that the metaphor is simply being stretched a bit to make the point about the marriage; that would certainly make sense. And yet there's something else going on here as well, something that connects this poem back to Crabtree's other work, and to the critical discussions throughout.

For all of the frustrations that the speaker experiences in “Smith Creek No. 1,” a speaker is under many of the same domestic pressures as Mrs. Noah. In “Smith Creek No. 2,” the speaker finds solace against her condition that manifests itself in her affinity to the natural world, and to the community of plants and animals with which she is intertwined. For Mrs. Noah, it is much the same way: the rigors of domestic responsibility are mitigated by the intimate relationship she shares with the animals on board.

“Learning”: a Revision of “Kudzu”

“Learning” is a remarkable Lou Crabtree poem, a favorite not only because of the familiar Roses department store named as a workplace in the poem, but also because it represents Crabtree at her most confident and unabashed. It is, in a sense, the work in which she constructs a persona that puts all of her knowledge bases together. It’s a persona poem, about a woman whose age we don’t know but who at least seems young in spirit (she has a “[b]utterfly tattoo” and drives “a red Corvette”). Having learned what we have about Crabtree from the other poems in *The River Hills and Beyond*, as well as from her biographical information, it’s hard not to imagine this poem is just as much about her herself as it is the imagined speaker (46).

Thinking of this poem that way really brings Crabtree’s connections to the critical texts on identity full circle. In “Learning,” we have one of the few instances of Crabtree producing a dialect poem; except for “Salvation,” it’s the only example of a poem by Crabtree with an Appalachian speaker who drops g’s or speaks in a nonstandard dialect. Yet this speaker is, in contrast to all of the stereotypes of mountain speakers of nonstandard speech, one of Crabtree’s wisest and most self-confident characters. As she explains, “I learned. / It came late. But it came each day / along the way” (47). This knowledge comes from her practical experience (“sleepin’ in the car / payin’ for every hot dog / peein’ in the woods”) and from more formal, scientific learning (“Learnin’ / birth from the caterpillar / death from the cocoon / resurrection from that butterfly”); as such, the lines offer a prime example of the constructed knowledge that Belenky describes (46, 47). It also describes, as Locklear does, a literacy that extends beyond the page, one that integrates social and cultural awareness into a sense of identity comfortable in its own place, but also comfortable moving

through social positions. And, intertextually, the cocoon of this poem serves as a rather positive coda to the cocoon of “Kudzu.” Whereas that poem represents a spiritually old speaker, besieged by the interpretations and paradigms of the community around her, dying in the cocoon of the kudzu, this poem presents the opposite: a spiritually young speaker, reborn in the light of trying experiences, who is able to develop a full and robust sense of self through her reliance on that experience.

Moreover, the poem also provides perhaps the most directly stated view on religion in all of Crabtree’s work. As the narrator explains about her spiritual practices,

Learnin’ every day is Judgment Day.

To find hidden treasure

read the Bible.

Mornin’ is a good time to pray.

Gets the gates of the day open. (46)

What is implicit in much of the rest of Crabtree’s work becomes explicit here: Christianity is a real force in the poems, and it is *not* purely an otherworldly experience in our literature. Here, as Susan Collins’s work suggests they should, the tropes of the Bible become lived reality for this Appalachian speaker, and she understands them through her own experiences—her “every day,” not the concept of a “soon and very soon,” is the true “Judgment Day” (46). God is immediate; God is present; and God speaks and communicates intimately with women who have butterfly tattoos and drive fast cars and talk candidly about their bodies. The controlling metaphor of the poem, the “butterfly tattoo,” also represents the cyclical experience of nature that Awiakta speaks of, and the more general connection to nature outlined by Engelhardt. The persona understands life as a process, of “birth,” “death,”

and “resurrection,” and she understands that the process is a natural one (47). What matters most in life is its circular nature: what is born dies, and what dies is born again.

“Of Circles” and Conclusion

The last poem in *The River Hills and Beyond* is “Of Circles.” It’s one of Crabtree’s “space poems,” and in it, Crabtree brings the cosmos of her work together into a final, encompassing conclusion. “Of Circles” is Crabtree’s final taxonomy of the universe; what appears in it seems to be a Whitmanesque catalog, nothing more than a list. Reading it this way reveals it as an entire capsulation of her work, a rendering as equals of all who have mattered in her stories and poems. This is the poem in its entirety, or at least all of it that appears in *The River Hills and Beyond*:

Men in saloons in their beer
talking in circles
fresh from arctic rigors
fresh from the top of the world
talking in circles.

Indians and senior citizens
hopping around in circle dances.

George laughing
at his cow flops and horse apples.

The common chicken
turning circles in the dust.

Circles of raindrops
on the face of the pond.
Old John lost in his circle
trying to find his way home.

The family circle
of a mother's arms
around the child.

Circles of eternity
In God's encircling arms.

Planets to asteroids
to particles of dust.
Words like forever —
forever, ethereal, perfection
connecting no end no beginning
our circular destiny.

Meg, Beth, John
finding circles
for their fingers. (52)

If we look at the second stanza in particular, we see that just as with “The Jake Pond,” there seems to be little to no distinction made between people of different races, people of

different species, and even people like “raindrops” that most of us would consider inanimate objects (52). Relationships exist only in that cyclical, repeating web of life that we’ve mentioned so many times throughout this study, and for the web to be complete, all of its members. And, as a last comment on her heterodoxy, she emphasizes the fact that in her conception of the universe there is “no end no beginning” (52).

What Crabtree brings to the forefront in this poem, in spite of everything we’ve mentioned about the particular connections for her work to women’s lives, is the fact that while many of the lessons in her work are learned by women, and are learned in the context of being a woman in a particular place at a particular time, the lessons that come out of her work matter for a much, much larger population. Gender, place, and even species are all ancillary concerns.

So what was it that not only made Lou Crabtree speak, but that also made her speech her own? What elements, what constructions, and what new insights did Crabtree have? What new things did she find and say, and how did she rearrange the rhetoric and knowledge bases of the traditions she inherited into something new? In short, how does she contribute to our discourse? For one, she provide us an example of a creative writer who applies the same principles that undergird ecological feminist and CAS theory in her work, even if she doesn’t use that terminology, and even though she was writing mostly before that terminology was developed. Moreover, instead of reacting to dominant trends and dominant culture, as much contemporary feminist, ecological, and ecological feminist writing does (and, no doubt, this is necessary work), she creates spaces in which feminist paradigms are normative, and in which dominant trends are the aberrations. Lastly, she provides us, especially in her poems, a voice equally comfortable in both rural and cosmopolitan spaces, so comfortable in fact that

it works to break down the sometimes reductive binary relationship we make between those spaces.

Lou Crabtree matters because she wrote in spite of sixty years of little or no reward, just for the pleasure and the healing of the doing of it. She matters because there are thousands of young people, such as those Erica Locklear discussed with Denise Giardina and Lee Smith, who still need to see the name of their town or a town near theirs inside a book; I still get a little electric shock in me every time I read “Abingdon” or “Saint Paul” in her work. She matters because at her best moments she’s absolutely original. She is *not* a feminist, but rather whatever’s going to come when we don’t have to use that word anymore, when feminism *is* the hegemony. And she matters because she wrote with *kindness*, with a love for people after acknowledging all of their darkness. And, perhaps most of all, she matters because in everything she did she refused boxes, almost always picking the *both*: both traditional and radical, both old and young, both homebody and worldly, both *of* Appalachia and *beyond* Appalachia, both religious and scientific, both quiet and a commotion.

I had the great pleasure, while drafting this study, of having a short conversation about Crabtree with the master Appalachian writer Gurney Norman (as well as the great pleasure of getting to shamelessly namedrop him now). In that conversation, Norman praised Crabtree as the true “songbird” of her place, as a writer whose slow, steady, quiet work held the particular resonance of that place, far and away outshining the writers who might have achieved more fame in their lives than she did, but who wrote quickly and loudly and began to sing before they were really ready. That description, as well as Lee Smith’s, creates the title of this study: “Songbird Commotion,” a title that’s pretty appropriate.

But more than anything else, it's a shame that Lou Crabtree did not become in her life one of the major authors of the Appalachian literary canon; but teachers and scholars will surely read and teach and write about more her than she is now. Her published materials are small, absolutely, and whether enough of her unpublished work exists in extant copies to produce any more books than the two slim volumes we already have, I don't know. But what we do have of her work should be enough to read and teach and celebrate, quite a bit more than we do.

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